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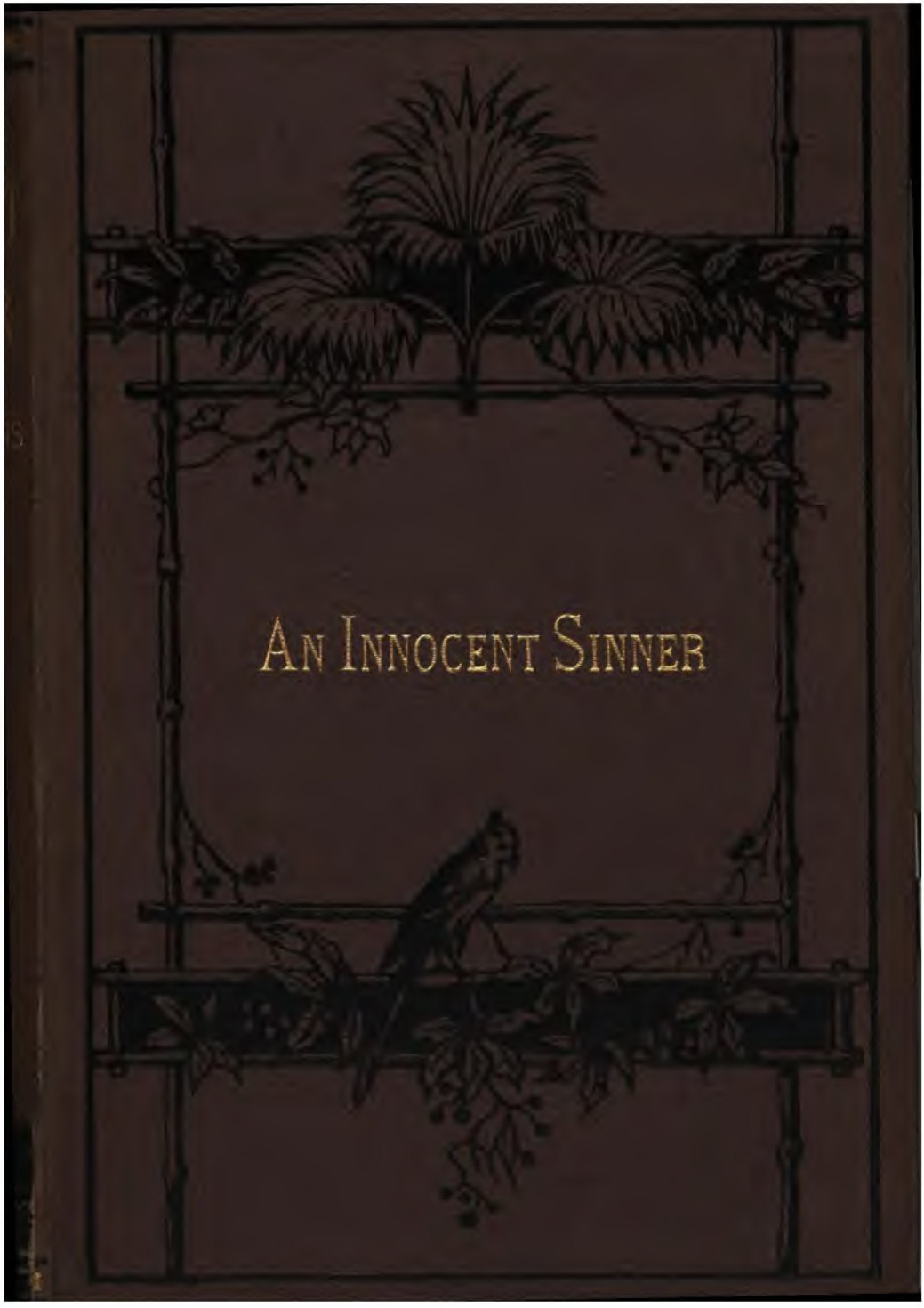
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AN INNOCENT SINNER


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AN INNOCENT SINNER.

AN INNOCENT SINNER.

A Psychological Romance.

BY

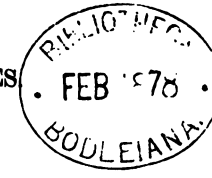
MABEL COLLINS.

"We sit in smooth content with wonted mien!
Comes whirling by the awful UNFORESEEN:
Throws our best balanced plans in hocus-pocus,
And turns short views of life all out of focus;
Shakes our self-centre, makes us well-awake—
Find where we are, and what new road to take."

'Travels of a Journeyman.'

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.



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PREFACE.

—◆—

In this story, which is based upon a situation that has afforded food for romancists from all time, the author has had to face the assertion of M. Dumas *fils*, that on this subject, "It is absolutely necessary to say something new. . . . Predecessors have passed that way, and have shut the door behind them."

M. Emile Girardin had asked his opinion on a dramatic work, which his critic allowed to be clever; but, said he:— "We have all posed our conclusions on this eternal subject. Yours is not a conclusion at all." The present writer is prepared to be considered no more successful in this respect than M. Girardin!

M. Dumas instances well-known plays in which the same situation has been elaborated, and every conceivable mode of escape from it exhausted. The author of these volumes believes that in them a new combination is effected, by simply placing one of the actors in the little drama in a state in which people are conventionally supposed to give up all interest in this particular stage, and in the actors upon it. On this subject every one has an opinion; but within the covers of a novel let us lay aside opinions: we are in the world of romance.

Leaving behind the grosser life of the French school, the writer has dared to treat this situation from a purely psychological point of view.

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AN INNOCENT SINNER.

"*Astrologos.* I have known men who died, and came
to life again;
I have known men who died, and came to death again;
I have known men who neither lived nor died at all,
But were pure phantoms, shadows on the atmosphere.
Raphael. Poor ghosts! who shivered through the
world."

'*The Comedy of Dreams.*' *Mortimer Collins.*

CHAPTER I.

THE DOCTOR AT HOME.

"Crabbed age and youth
Cannot live together."

SANDVILLE is a tolerably brisk country town; being near enough to London to attract many city men as residents in the summer months, it catches a savour of the quick metropolitan life. At the same time it has

a character of its own; a gay, holiday air, that seems partly due to the fresh breeze which comes across the wide surrounding country, partly to the picturesque building of the town, and partly to the transient stay of many of its visitors.

Dr. Hetley's house is in the High-Street of Sandville, close to the railway station, and close to the post-office, in the midst of such life as the town contains. It retires a little from the actual street, screening itself with a few modest trees. Roses encircle the windows, and try to look as if they were pure country bred. They are not far from it, for the sweet Surrey air enters the doctor's dining-room window, with scarcely any adulteration in its flavour.

Dr. Hetley stands this morning by that same window, inhaling the fresh breeze. He is a man scarcely at the prime of life;

with a quick brain, as you could see by his eyes, with plenty of hard work to steady him, as the lines on his forehead show plainly; and, yet, a certain expression that lingers about the rather humorous mouth suggests a subdued rebelliousness against that process of being steadied.

He did not need to be out very early this morning, so he had comé down late to breakfast. This he did partly because he really felt lazy, and partly because it always put his aunt Pauncefort, who managed his house, and tried to manage him, out of temper. He was adding to the offence by looking leisurely out of the window, instead of rushing to table with a penitent face; but he had still enough of the boy left in him to make the consciousness of this fact rather add to the pleasantness of the morning air than otherwise.

He finds it charming to look out and watch the progress of the paper-boy down the street; charming to lean on his window-sill and wait some five minutes, until the boy comes into the garden and hands him *The Times;* charming to lazily open the paper out, while the sun makes him blink so that he scarcely can see the words. Dr. Hetley really does enjoy all this, because the greater part of his days are spent in active, incessant work, mental and physical. He seldom has time to lounge; and as, like most really hard-working men, he has a vast capacity for idleness, he thoroughly delights in being lazy now and then.

But Mrs. Pauncefort cannot appreciate any of this, because she never has enough to do. She is always working herself up into a passion in order to occupy her mind;

and Dr. Hetley is well aware that her marvellous morning-cap is now quivering with its wearer's indignation.

Presently comes the decisive tap of a napkin-ring on the table, the quick scrape of a chair, and Aunt Pauncefort rises and speaks,

"I cannot remain any longer, Leonard, to look after your breakfast, as I have household matters to attend to. I have had everything kept hot, but it will soon all be cold again."

And Mrs. Pauncefort, a thin, upright old lady with a grim face and a military walk which earned her the nickname of "the General," left the room. Dr. Hetley listened to the tap-tap of her high-heeled shoes, as she went off to visit her ill-humour on the servants, and then, going to the table, began his breakfast with perfect

equanimity. He found everything hot, and very good; for the old lady was a grand housekeeper, and very proud of her capabilities in that truly feminine direction.

He wanted to read the paper through during breakfast, so as to turn his mind to other matters immediately afterwards; but presently he heard the tap-tap through the hall again, and he laid it down to see what might be coming.

"The General" came in, and paused opposite him, like a soldier at attention.

"Have you all you want, Leonard?" she asked, making a visible effort to sweeten her sourness.

"All, my dear aunt! and everything is perfection, as it always is under your excellent management," said the doctor, with a wave of his hand over the breakfast table, and a look at the old lady

through his spectacles. Those spectacles might have been alive; so kindly did they lend themselves to the doctor, and help to make his expression unintelligible to a spectator who could not understand mixed emotions.

"That's right," said she; and after lingering a moment, walked off again, apparently because she did not see what else to do.

"I wonder what my aunt wants?" the irreverent nephew reflected. "The dear old girl's little plots are always so very palpable. I am sure she wants to ask something before I go out, or she would not try so hard to be sweet."

As he expected, in she marched again, before long. She came and sat down in an easy-chair; and then went straight to the point, as was her usual fashion.

"Are you going to the rose-show this afternoon?"

Dr. Hetley laid down his knife and fork, and emitted a groan.

"I wished to go," she said, stiffly, on receiving this unpromising rejoinder, "but you are so peculiar and so very unsociable that I might have expected you to grunt like a bear when I mention the subject, instead of making a proper answer. I wish James could have come to-day instead of to-morrow. He is not so wanting in proper respect for his elders as some people are."

The old lady was up in arms. Dr. Hetley had learned to regard this as rather amusing; the only drawback was that his aunt became so much less good-looking when ill-temper got the mastery; and then, he was sure it had a very bad effect

on her health. He would be dead in a month, he often thought, if he got into as many passions as his venerable aunt.

"I am sorry, too, that James is not here," he answered, quietly, "because he likes ordinary society, and I don't. It will put me out for a week, if I have to go, and be bored for a couple of hours among all the dressed-up fools of Sandville."

The line down his forehead grew rather deeper as he spoke. You see, these people came of the same stock, and the good doctor might have yielded to small ill-humours oftener than he did, if God had not gifted him with a kindly soul and a deeply tender heart, which enabled him, as a rule, to stand aside from these temptations of the nerves.

"Oh! *of course*," began the old lady,

as she rose from her chair, with a dry chippiness of voice, and a poker-like rigidity of manner, which a dull pen can give no idea of. She fancied that this was dignity.

"Well, I don't mind one hour of it," interrupted the doctor, as he glanced over his notes of professional engagements, "but I can't quite say what time I will call for you."

"Oh! indeed," said she. "No, thank you. I would not go with you now, if you went down on your knees to me."

Dr. Hetley raised his hands and eyebrows with a deprecating gesture peculiar to him. He took up his paper again. This was maddening to Mrs. Pauncefort; she meant to beat a dignified retreat after her last words,—terminating the interview herself; but not to be answered was a thing she

never could endure. So she began again, with a bitter and aggrieved manner, and discussed the whole matter from the beginning, regretting again and again that James, the proper, the reverent James, was not present, to give an example of well-conductedness to this reprobate nephew. Any one who happens to have a relation or friend gifted with this lady's talent will know how the affair was magnified; how it was made to lead into a dozen other such little bygone affairs, which had to be re-discussed; and will also know that before Dr. Hetley's little brougham and pair of pretty bay horses stood before his door, aunt Pauncefort had gained her point, and it was settled that they were to go in the afternoon to the rose-show.

Dr. Hetley carried his papers and his books, and various little mysterious cases,

and stowed them away in the brougham, and then—well-brushed, well-dressed, respectable to a degree,—he drove off for his morning's work. He passed out of Mrs. Pauncefort's atmosphere, to enter that of suffering humanity. For this man, though nothing but a rising young doctor in a country town, carried about with him a true gift of healing. The suffering were his natural prey; he wanted to heal them. Rich and poor were alike to him; except that in his heart he rather preferred the poor, because they were not quite so consistently ungrateful.

He was a fine man, of what may perhaps be fairly now called the English type; you saw no special sign of the Norse-King or the Saxon about him, except perhaps in a tall, athletic form. Dark haired, dark bearded, with grey, short-sighted, yet

quickly observant eyes; a clear skin, abundant health, a great deal of natural animal life and spirits, and altogether a fine physique. Such was Dr. Hetley. Sick people liked to hold his hand, and hear his voice; they always liked him, though their friends often did not. For he was straightforward and brusque, to people he despised or laughed at. And he had a bad habit of despising and laughing at people—when they were well.

During his rounds he passed through a village which was some distance from Sandville. It was hardly big enough to be called a village; but there was a railway station for the convenience of the many large country houses which lay all around, hidden by the trees. Not far from the station a pretty house had stood empty some little time; Dr. Hetley noticed

as he passed it, that it was no longer empty.

When they met at their midday meal, Mrs. Pauncefort told him all that was yet known in Sandville about the new arrivals at Laham Court, this same pretty house.

Mrs. Pauncefort was the most inveterate gossip in Sandville; although probably she would have died of horror and amazement could the fact have been revealed to her, by some supernatural opening of her mind.

At all events, Dr. Hetley was never allowed to go ignorant of the important affairs of the town, though most of such information passed in at one ear and out of the other. He forgot things; Mrs. Pauncefort did not, and could not understand any one who did.

The newcomers were people of wealth and position; Mr. and Mrs. Hamerton

and their two daughters. Dr. Hetley did not take in anything more about them, for his mind was full of a paper he was writing for a medical journal; and a case he had just visited bore upon its subject, so he was provokingly abstracted.

CHAPTER II.

EYES THAT BEWITCH.

"... And thou
Didst glide away. Only thine eyes remained.
They *would not* go—they never yet have gone."
Edgar Allan Poe.

"DEAR me! We *are* grand!" remarked Dr. Hetley as his aunt came into the room where he was waiting, ready to start.

"What's the matter?" asked the lady, with a sudden setting of her lips, for she thought she had made a supreme toilette.

And so perhaps she had; sober and dignified to a degree was Mrs. Pauncefort's society attire; and one can only suppose that

it was that very fact which provoked her graceless relation to invariably make observations like the above whenever he saw her dressed. How innocently do people make butts of themselves! You may generally do anything without being laughed at, if you do not mind being laughed at.

The rose-show was like all other rose-shows; there were too many flowers and too many people; and the latter fact was dreadful to the martyred doctor, for he knew nearly everybody. He had grown of late very weary of these rich frivolous people who frequented Sandville as visitors; and even more weary of the rich respectable people who drove into the town from their country houses, and looked about them at the small fry that dwelt in the town, with a patronising air. He disliked the

greater part of them; for he knew himself to be intellectually their superior, yet he had been patronised in most of their houses; he had received mean letters from the richest of them, complaining of his fees; when he, poor man, instead of merely supplying them with a few drugs, and a little time, for which the fee might pay, had given to them out of his very self—his physical and mental health. But they did not know this; and so he criticised them and held himself their superior. A dangerous thing for a young man of ordinary self-pride, to believe himself better than his neighbours!

It was a matter of business to appear as little bored as possible, and so Dr. Hetley did his best. He moved among their friends with Mrs. Pauncefort, whose august lead he humbly followed. He did not care

to leave her; there were too many young ladies around him; and although the doctor did not imagine himself a lady-killer, yet he had a wholesome fear of certain palpably designing mammas.

Mrs. Pauncefort presently whispered to him that the Hamertons' carriage had come; and she was evidently much vexed not to have witnessed the arrival. Dr. Hetley was not equally disappointed, however; and thought no more about them.

The Hamertons had no friends in the neighbourhood, and there had been no time as yet for them to be called upon. So they walked through the tents looking at the roses, and not noticing the people around them much.

There was Mr. Hamerton, a soldierly-looking man with a faded kind of fire in his eyes, and his two daughters: one, a

fair creature of smiles and dimples, and the other a delicate-looking girl, of a dark intense beauty, whose large eyes were full of the same fire that once had burned in her father's. They were a remarkable and distinguished-looking group; and the town-dwellers, who knew all about them, were much interested. They had not reached the tent in which Mrs. Pauncefort stood, and had yet to suffer the inspection of her inquisitorial gaze. Nevertheless, the dark one said to her laughing sister,

"These people seem to me to stare rather, Jessie. I suppose they know we are strangers; but I should not have thought Sandville people would have noticed that."

They did not know that their carriage had distinguished them from passing visitors in the town; so quick are the eyes of gossips.

"Are you tired?" said Jessie to her sister, who leaned a little on her arm. "We will not go through all the tents if you are."

Mr. Hamerton, who was in front, looked round at his beautiful dark-eyed daughter with a slightly anxious expression, as Jessie spoke; but he was reassured by a smile, and they went on in the same fashion, Mr. Hamerton leading the way, and the girls arm-in-arm behind.

Presently they entered the tent where Dr. Hetley and his aunt stood in the midst of a crowd of talking people. It was very full, and the Hamertons when they got inside had to crawl at the pace of the stream.

Jessie was looking about her with much amusement (for she was one of those happy natures who are always amused), when

she felt her sister's hand close tight upon her arm. She looked hastily round, and saw her sister's attention fixed upon something far down the tent. Her eyes were wide open and her face pale.

"Stella!" exclaimed Jessie, in a low tone that those around might not hear her. "Stella, what do you see? What is the matter? Are you ill?"

Stella answered her in a thrilling whisper without moving her eyes.

"Child," she said, "look at that man. My God! what have I met with? What can it be that tears at my heart, and bewilders my brain like this? Do you see him?"

Jessie looked; and her sister's eyes appeared to be fixed upon Dr. Hetley, who was standing silent, wearing an abstracted expression. She turned back to her sister

in alarm, for Stella's passionate soul and frail body made any emotion a terror to her friends.

"I see," said Jessie, "but I don't know him. What is it, dear Stella? you must feel ill?"

"Jessie," was all Stella's answer, "there is something strange about that man! I would give worlds to speak to him, but I dare not—it would kill me! No matter, I shall see him again: I shall speak to him. Ah!"

Dr. Hetley had raised his head, turned, and looked straight across the crowd into Stella's eyes. Jessie was exceedingly startled by this, and was growing much alarmed by Stella's intensely white face and extraordinary words. She did not know how to act, and had just put out her hand to arrest her father when she felt that

Stella's whole weight was thrown against her. She clutched her father, and he, turning, saw at once that Stella had fainted.

Their carriage had been kept close by the gates, and a servant stood outside the tents. Mr. Hamerton was a man of quick action; he summoned the servant at once, and in a moment they were carrying Stella to the carriage, while Jessie, who was incarnate April, followed in tears.

No one had time to offer to help them; and by the time Dr. Hetley had recovered from his surprise at the incident, and had made his way hurriedly through the crowd, the carriage had driven off.

"How very sudden," remarked Mrs. Pauncefort, brimming over with interest, "the unfortunate girl must be subject to such attacks, as her friends appeared to be

quite prepared for it. Dear me, what a misfortune! For she is very nice-looking; really a pretty face; quite remarkable!"

They had to leave now, and Mrs. Pauncefort talked on about the Hamertons, as they drove home. But Dr. Hetley leaned back in the brougham, and heard not a word she said.

CHAPTER III.

IS IT LOVE? IS IT DEATH?

"Her, who knew that love can vanquish death."

Tennyson.

JAMES PAUNCEFORT arrived on the afternoon of the next day.

Mrs. Pauncefort's face relaxed into a grim graciousness. James was her only son, and the pride of her heart.

He was in an office in the city, where he worked steadily, and got on fairly well. He generally spent the greater part of his holidays with his mother and Dr. Hetley.

Dr. Hetley was always delighted to see

him, for he was agreeably relieved of Mrs. Pauncefort's gossip and general attentions while he was there.

It may be a matter of perplexity why an independent young man should put up continually with a Gorgon for his companion. There were several reasons. One was business-like. Aunt Pauncefort entered society for him, and played hostess. Moreover she was so eminently respectable that it did away with some of the need for the young doctor getting married. People thought of Mrs. Pauncefort, and felt sure that no relation of hers would do anything he shouldn't. Besides all this, Dr. Hetley was gregarious, and was a man of family affections; and he and Mrs. Pauncefort being lonely members of the family, it seemed to both only natural that they should live together. Though Mrs. Pauncefort

was venomous and narrow-minded, she was as strong a partisan as she was an enemy.

He came home in the evening to find James and his mother as happy as possible. Like two old women, they sat drinking tea and talking gossip. Dr. Hetley welcomed James, drank his tea and retired into his study with alacrity. He was still at the article he was burning to write for a medical quarterly, and possibly he meant to mix that with a little quiet laziness.

"My dear James," remarked Mrs. Pauncefort shaking her cap solemnly, "your cousin is really most unsociable."

Dr. Hetley was emancipated now from kettledrums, dances, dinner parties. James was as restless as his mother, and willing to take her everywhere. And as he was a fine young man, with erect bearing, a hand-

some face, and pleasant manners, he was much in request.

Dr. Hetley shut himself into his study evening after evening with a sense of exquisite luxury. Nowhere else had he ever found so much pleasure yet, as in his study arm-chair. Here he would rest, after a day's work done, and reflect over what he had achieved; making the most of the good and the least of the ill, for he had long since found that life needs a little self-deceit to make it pleasant.

Then he would turn to his books. But to-night, a vision came between him and the page. He saw again those intense eyes through which a woman's soul had spoken to him. And he wondered what it meant, and why the remembrance clung so to his mind.

By degrees he grew to linger more again

in the drawing-room, for he found that a new name frequently appeared in the conversations. The Paunceforts often spoke of Jessie Hamerton. He discovered that they met her at certain houses; and by quietly keeping his attention to what was said around him, he heard enough to arouse in his mind a strange romantic curiosity.

Mrs. Pauncefort was an unscrupulous questioner. Finding that Jessie continually appeared in society without her sister Stella, she made it her business to find out, direct from the fountain-head, if it were possible in no other way, the reason of this. So she made friends with Mrs. Hamerton, who, a pretty kindly woman that once had been just like her daughter Jessie, was pleased with apparent sympathy, and glad to chat a little about her private concerns.

He heard that Stella was very ill. Al-

ways delicate and an anxiety to them, yet before now she had been quite accustomed to go about with her sister; for her mental life was so quick and her sympathies so earnest and vivid, that a secluded life was insufficient for her. If compelled to remain in her room for any time, her mind fastened itself upon some purpose with a zeal so intense, that she would pursue it in spite of all obstacles; and they became terrified to see how recklessly the spirit controlled the trembling and inefficient body.

They were compelled to take her about whenever possible, and feed her mind with change of ideas; to interrupt her studies and her aims, and check, without letting her suspect it, her resolute pursuit of any object which she had in view.

"She must be dreadfully persistent and obstinate," remarked Mrs. Pauncefort.

Dr. Hetley did his best to digest what he heard, and separate the facts from the remarks upon them.

This much was fact. Since that day at the flower-show, Stella had been unable to leave the house.

Dr. Hetley dwelt on this. What did it mean? Why did they not send for him? He anxiously inquired whether they had sent for either of the other doctors of the place.

No: their physician from London had been down once, and had thought there was no cause for alarm. Rest, quiet, and unexciting amusement was his prescription.

One day Dr. Hetley, in the course of his visits, called at a house where a croquet-party was going on. He went out on to the lawn for a few moments and

mixed with the others. His aunt and James were there; and he observed that the latter was talking to a pretty, smiling blonde, whom he guessed at once to be Jessie Hamerton. He had no remembrance of her; her sister's face had eclipsed hers entirely when he saw them together.

He heard a lady ask her of her sister; Jessie's face sobered directly, and her eyes were full of tears. She said Stella was too weak to leave her room, except for a very short time.

A moment afterwards, she was laughing gaily with James Pauncefort. Dr. Hetley went up to them, and James introduced him.

After a little conversation with them, he had to go away; but he had seen quite enough for once. He saw that James

Pauncefort was paying a very marked attention to Jessie Hamerton.

He frowned a little over it at first. Would they suit each other? He believed James to be exactly like his mother; and what we can just endure in a woman, becomes detestable in a man: and *vice versâ.* If so, would James's nature be kindly enough for the fair April morning he had chosen? He had no right to say anything against James; he was an eminently eligible young man. He could not go to Mr. Hamerton and say that he did not see the germs of nobility in James's character; and so he decided to think no more about it. But he could not help speculating as to whether this would not bring him nearer to Stella.

He began to watch James's romance with some amusement. One day he found his

cousin looking melancholy ; and after awhile elicited the reason. Jessie had given up visiting for the present, in consequence of her sister's illness. The physician had been down twice again, and said nothing more could be done. He expected her to recover slowly. But Jessie, who worshipped her sister, took the alarm and would not leave her side.

Poor James is in consternation. He has but a few days more of holiday. What is to be done ? He cannot go back to town, and leave matters like this.

At last he makes up his mind what to do. He proceeds at once to carry it out according to the Pauncefort fashion. Luckily his mother has gone to tea with an ancient lady, to indulge in a rare dish of scandal with her. Dr. Hetley is out

on his rounds; James has a clear afternoon before him.

He gets himself up in his most creaseless coat; he clothes his lower limbs in garb so new that it gives no suggestion of human legs within; clothes-poles would do as well. He steals a Maréchal-Niel rose-bud from his cousin's favourite rose-tree to adorn his button-hole with; and then starts off across the fields for Laham Court.

Jessie is sitting at Stella's window this afternoon, reading aloud a little now and then. But it is difficult to find any subject which will keep Stella's attention now. This is something new, and therefore alarming. She seems as if her mind were fixed on an absorbing subject or object, which those around her know nothing of. It imparts to Jessie's quickly

apprehensive nature a certain loneliness, as if her sister had in a measure gone from her. Unintelligible as Stella's character has always been to Jessie, yet constant companionship has enabled her to enter into her sister's thoughts and keep pace with her interests. Never before has she felt shut out from them as now, although there is nothing to make her feel this save the wandering far-off look in Stella's deep eyes; but that look continually brings the tears to her own, and continually fills her with a nameless fear.

Stella lies on her wide sofa beside the open French window, her dark hair lying loose around her, her hands folded listlessly, her eyes most often fixed upon the sky. She is dressed in a blue and white morning wrapper. For days past she

has not cared to dress and has remained thus, seldom speaking, but wearing a far-off pre-occupied look.

Jessie sits by the window, sometimes taking up her book, sometimes furtively watching her sister, most often looking across the balcony of flowers, down the avenue which leads from the road to the house.

They have sat a long while thus in silence, when suddenly Jessie utters an exclamation. Stella's eyes turn questioningly upon her, but Jessie has not looked round. After a moment she says, with a faint tremble in her voice,

"It is James Pauncefort. He is coming to call, and I've got this horrid dress on; and, oh dear, papa and mamma are out."

"I suppose they will tell him so," replies Stella, indifferently. "He will not ask for you, will he?"

"Oh! no," says Jessie, rather lugubriously, and sits still, much exercised in her mind as to whether she shall rush away and change the "horrid dress" on the chance; but shyness carries the day and she does not quite like to brave Stella's questioning eyes.

Meantime, James Pauncefort asks for Miss Jessie, and is shown into the drawing-room to wait for her.

Jessie blushes all over when the maid comes up to her. She is not brave enough to change her dress under the eyes of both Stella and the maid; especially as it is all that can be desired beyond the fact that it does not become her, or she fancies it does not. She tries to settle her somewhat wild locks, with an unconcerned air; and failing signally therein, goes down at last in desperation.

An hour afterwards she is back at Stella's side, laughing and crying in a breath. She hides her face in Stella's robe.

"What has kept you, dear?" asks Stella.

"Why, I have not been gone a minute," cries unconscious Jessie. "How could he come bothering me when you are ill? Oh! Stella, how pale you are! Oh! why did I leave you at all? How could we be so unfeeling; and now papa has come in and James has gone to him —."

Stella opens her eyes just here and fixes them on Jessie. Then she raises herself on her elbow and looks again.

"And I never suspected it. My dear Jessie, I must see him; is he gone away? I may never have another chance. And somebody has come to take my Jessie's love from me. Jessie, we have been a great

deal to each other, and now we are to be torn asunder—never again can we be the same. Don't cry, dear; it's not your fault; I think my heart has been wandering too. I don't know where, but something pulls it, and I am no longer the Stella that I have been. Play-time is over, Jessie, my sister, say good-bye to the sweet play-time we have spent together. Together we leave it, Jessie; I am so glad of that—I am so glad your lover has come."

Stella's voice is strange and excited, and she speaks as if half unconscious of her immediate surroundings. As her words cease she falls back, and her arm droops nerveless from the couch. Jessie hangs over her a moment, and then in sudden terror flies from the room, calling for her father. Mr. Hamerton is shut up with James Pauncefort in his library; but her

agonised shriek penetrates there, and they both come hurrying out. Jessie catches her father and pulls him into Stella's room, while James stands amazed on the stairway. A moment later he hears Mr. Hamerton's voice—"A doctor! fetch a doctor!" Crying out, "I will go; my cousin will be at home now," James turns and runs downstairs and out of the house.

It is a long way to run from Laham Court to Dr. Hetley's house in Sandville. But James knows there is no doctor nearer, and so, thinking more of pleasing Jessie than anything else, he runs without stopping from door to door. As he turns the street corner he sees that, as often happens, the doctor's brougham is standing at his gate, ready to carry him off again the moment he has eaten his dinner. "Just

right," he thinks; and runs straight round to the dining-room window, which, as usual, stands open.

"Why, James," cries Mrs Pauncefort, "whatever is the matter?"

The doctor, whose back is towards him, turns round, dinner napkin in hand, to see what alarms her. Catching sight of James's face he starts up.

"They want you at Laham Court," says James, "for Stella. Come now."

But the doctor has already snatched his hat in the hall, and is at the front door. Hastily directing the coachman, they both get in, and Mrs. Pauncefort is left alone—not to finish her dinner, for unsatisfied curiosity would never let her do that.

CHAPTER IV.

STELLA.

"In vain he weeps, in vain he sighs,
Her cheek is cold as ashes;
Nor love's own kiss shall wake those eyes,
To lift their silken lashes."

Campbell.

"O for the touch of a vanished hand!
And the sound of a voice that is still!"

Tennyson.

"SHE is an angel indeed," cried James, the egotist, as they sat down in the brougham.

"Who, Stella?" asked the doctor, startled at words which sounded ominous in his ear.

"No, no," answered James, testily, "How should I know what *she* is like? I have never seen her. I mean Jessie."

"Oh!"

They drove on in silence for a while, until at last James could contain himself no longer, and was compelled to tell the doctor his afternoon's history: how he had wooed and won his angel; how he had then and there seized upon her father, entered with him into all details of income, etc., and finally obtained his consent; how well and successfully he had managed it all; how delighted Jessie was with him and he with Jessie. He was eminently satisfied; there was no drawback to his happiness, except perhaps that he could not marry Jessie at once and complete the whole arrangement. His restless mind passed on over all their prospects, good

and bad; and as he was incapable of thinking to himself, Dr. Hetley had the benefit of it all. It was nothing new to him, as he had watched the development of the affair; but he knew James sufficiently well not to be surprised at the full length account of his sentiments and position with which he was favoured.

He did not pay much attention to it, though James was his cousin; his mind had wandered on before him to Laham Court.

He had never been in the house. He could not picture Stella amid any familiar surroundings. He felt as if on the brink of something wholly new, as if he trembled on the threshold of a fresh world of sensation and emotion. Should he cross the threshold? and how? Would he find the woman with the wonderful eyes a reality?

Would her hand guide him across this imaginary threshold? Was there something infinitely more real than anything he had yet experienced awaiting him?

He suffered himself to fall into a dream of conjecture, and was half startled when the carriage turned in at the Laham Court gates. But habit is a good friend sometimes, and on the instant that Dr. Hetley sprang out on to the steps of the house, he became the professional man and nothing else. No trace of the dreamer remained; even his warm physical life lay cloaked and masked; he was Dr. Hetley and no more.

Mr. Hamerton came downstairs to meet him; a terrible look on his somewhat stern face. Seeing it, Dr. Hetley asked no questions, but merely followed him to Stella's room.

He sent his rapid eyes once over it, and caught the effect that Stella's ardent and vivid spirit impressed around her; that glance was just one quick look for her character.

Then his eyes fastened on the form that lay still upon the sofa—just the same as after her words to Jessie, the head thrown back, one arm falling loosely to the ground. Her lips wore so happy a curve that she seemed to smile at him, as he came towards her. Did she smile? was she awakening? No. Before he had half crossed the room he saw the truth.

Stella was gone. Gone for ever, as we poor mortals say.

He knew it was an impossibility that he should ever meet that woman, who had given him a vision of her soul life. He knew he could never have met her

as we meet our friends; have shaken hands with her and exchanged ordinary words. He had been possessed with the thought that this their first encounter would have been full of something strange; but he had not imagined that life could be capable of such blankness as this—that his dream should be ended for ever, ere it had scarce begun.

Well, it was over; and he must look about among those commonplace people whom he had always met with till now, for interests and for love. He had not had time to love this dead woman; he had only suffered himself to dream of it. He must not dream again; he must hold himself amid wide-awake ordinary life.

All this passed through his mind as he leaned over the couch. He did not

touch the quiet form; he only looked down into the face for that one moment, while the others stood breathlessly around, and cast anxious glances from her face to his. He was unconscious of them; the shock had banished the unreal professional man, for the moment; and left in his place, a body whose conscious life stood still; within it a solitary soul, that had allowed itself for once to step aside into a land of mystery and hope; and had suddenly been cast out from thence into its solitude again.

"Tell me what to do, Dr. Hetley!" cried out Mrs. Hamerton in the midst of the silence. "I have never seen her like this. Tell me what to do!"

"Nothing," he answered, his eyes still on the face which each instant grew more sweet in its smile. Then he looked up,

and saw the scared group around him, and shook himself together.

"She is gone," he said, very quietly; and even as he spoke, he crossed over and put his arm round Jessie. "We must take her out of the room," he said; and both father and mother came to her, and they carried her away and laid her on her own bed, before the first shriek of that hysteria, which he had seen coming, rang through the house. For poor Jessie, the varied excitements of the day culminated in her first grief.

He did all he could for Jessie, and then, leaving the others beside her, stole out and returned to Stella's room. He craved to stand there alone, but a moment. He knew Mrs. Hamerton was following him; he knew he had but a moment. An irresistible impulse led him to cross to

the couch, scarcely knowing what he did; and suddenly, to kneel and kiss the hand that hung down, with a kiss full of inexplicable emotion.

CHAPTER V.

SOME OF THE DOCTOR'S SENTIMENTS.

"Bright Star! would I were steadfast as thou art!"
Keats.

"And so you have gone and got engaged, without a word to me! dutiful, certainly."

A stranger might have supposed that Mrs. Pauncefort spoke in pleasantry, notwithstanding her grim countenance; for it relaxed into a smile as she spoke, and she kept her eyes fixed upon the floor.

Dr. Hetley had long ago concluded, from the way in which she always commenced

to work herself up into a temper, that she enjoyed it, and that, unconsciously to herself, it gave the greatest savour of excitement to her life. She would smile like a cat on her victim, and then suddenly pounce, and open her battery.

James knew her well, and had always kept fairly clear of displeasure, with an ingenuity not un-cat-like, also.

But, calculating as he was, his genuine interest in the pursuit of Jessie had shut his mother, for the time, from his thoughts. She of course had observed his attentions to Jessie; but, as he did not say anything to her about it, she concluded it to be nothing but a flirtation that was not worth mentioning. That he had been serious—had all this time been working his way into Jessie's affections—that he

had gained them and settled the whole matter without asking her opinion, or even saying a word—the thing was inconceivable to her, and she gradually stung herself up to fever-heat.

The two young men sat silent. Dr. Hetley had gone into his study on their return from Laham Court, and had allowed time for James to tell Mrs. Pauncefort everything, so that he himself might be spared the narration. At last he went into the drawing-room for his evening cup of tea, and found that the history was but just done, for Mrs. Pauncefort had been turning James inside out. He had told all; the old lady listening the while with a grim smile. Dr. Hetley had arrived just in time to see the climax.

He sat down and sipped his tea lei-

surely. He rather enjoyed seeing James thoroughly in for it, once in his life.

And he *was* in for it. For half an hour he was upbraided for not having asked her opinion; this he bore humbly. Then she took a new tack and began to detract from Jessie. Now, an hour or two ago, if she had been asked, she would have said Jessie Hamerton was just the girl she would have chosen for him. But now, it was a different matter; and her ingenuity supplied her with a thousand objections. At last she succeeded in pushing James past endurance; and he soon showed himself her match.

Dr. Hetley grew more and more reflective.

"Jessie's temperament is hysterical," he thought to himself. "She is tender and timid as a fawn and always will be;

he is hard as flint, and carries a devil of a temper beneath that gentlemanly exterior. What will it come to? Perhaps to good. They are not so ill-matched as many a pair; perhaps the gentler soul will be the stronger, and will prevent him from growing into a crust of blind self-will like my aunt."

He rose and went into the garden to look at the moon. They were too far gone to notice his movements or indeed his existence. To him, meantime, they appeared mere buzzing midges, wasting empty breath. He knew the issue they would come to; how fiercely they would battle, and how they would end, after a torrent of words, and possibly, days of discomfort, in doing just what they both intended to do in the first instance, and which might have been done quietly

without the discussion and discomfort. So while they battled, he went out and looked at the calm moon, and wondered, with a dangerous feeling of superiority, whether that orb were farther off from him, in one sense, than were his talkative relations in another.

Dr. Hetley was not naturally different from his relatives; it was just because he had the irritability within and habitually conquered it, that he felt justified in that pleasant little sense of living in a different and better state than they did.

But soon, as he strolled through the moonlit, peaceful garden, these thoughts passed from him, and his mind became occupied with something more absorbing—that visionary face, which now must ever remain a vision merely. He had never



heard Stella's voice; he never could hear it now.

In his present mood he grew to look upon that single sight into Stella's eyes as the one opening of his life into the magical world of romance. He had thought of her as a soul; he had felt he could have loved her, and if it had been so, he would have loved her as a soul. That feeling he recognised as her own influence upon him; he could not imagine loving any other woman in that way; and altogether he thought he would rather not. He would prefer a creature more entirely composed of his own elements.

Now that Stella was indeed dead he already began to feel a sort of relaxation of the spiritual muscles — as if for a while he had been trying to feel good

enough for a woman such as he conceived her to be. And he felt as if that sort of romance was over for him. He had fallen again into the dim light of every-day living.

It was a blank, dull, cold world enough to Leonard Hetley, as he looked around him on that fair moonlight night.

A man of warm, kindly natural affection, he had but little to lavish it on. These Paunceforts, whom he had left wrangling in his drawing-room, were his nearest kin; and they could scarcely be looked upon very lovingly. True, in his daily work, which brought him into contact with real humanity, he met with some sweetness. But, though the power of sympathetic healing was his, yet he was not big enough to be a true philanthropist. He could not find any com-

pleteness of satisfaction in benefiting or helping others; he wanted something for himself to grip and hold as his own. He wanted pleasure for himself, and he did not know where to find it.

When he seriously thought of all this, as he was doing now, he turned finally to ambition as his most satisfying desire. Through the pleasant, because possible, work of helping those around him, he must make for himself a success. He desired a name and a position in the world, as all but the greatest of men do. To this he turned as his most abiding satisfaction.

And so, already, the vision that had dimly awakened his higher soul began to fade from his mind, and become clouded by selfish aims. A man must needs wilfully hide his higher soul sometimes, to

prevent the irksomeness of life from becoming too apparent. A blackness and chillness had crept into the doctor's heart; he must take refuge in small aims and fancy them large, in order to pass on cheerfully.

When he went in, he found that Mrs. Pauncefort had retired in high dudgeon, and James was walking about the room like a caged hyæna, his hands in his pockets and his brow knotted. He overflowed to his cousin directly. He could not forgive his mother what she had said against Jessie, and he must needs talk out his anger.

"I'm glad you care so much for Miss Hamerton," was all the doctor could be got to say; and then he left James to worry over his own affairs by himself.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PROFESSOR.

LAHAM COURT was shut up again. Stella's grave was in the little village churchyard close to the house; but Mrs. Hamerton was so overcome by the unexpected grief that she craved to be away from every association with it. Laham Court could never be anything to them now but a memorial of this first one lost out of their family.

They all felt as if their flower had been gathered from amongst them. Mr. Hamerton had seen in Stella's passionate and energetic nature a promise of something

which he himself might have been; while Jessie and her mother had learnt to look upon her as a being of a different order from themselves. She was gone, and they, like Dr. Hetley, had a feeling as if now there was nothing before them but common-place existence. Even Jessie, in the midst of her own romance as she was, could not resist the thought that had Stella ever loved, her love would have been of a different order—something more deep and absorbing. She wondered sometimes whether she were heartless; she could not think of James while buried in her first childlike grief for her sister; but, that over, her mind turned with relief to little details of life, and small excitements —and soon she found herself smiling and blushing over his letters! Then she would pause with a pang of reproach; she could

easily imagine that had *she* died first, Stella might have flung herself upon her grave and wholly refused to be comforted, perhaps killed herself by her sorrow. Jessie sometimes felt like a traitor, when she found that sweet breezes and the scent of flowers were still pleasant to her; when she caught herself looking in a mirror, and congratulating herself unthinkingly on the return of the roses in her cheeks.

They took a furnished house in London, and shut up Laham Court, just as it stood. None of them had the heart to dismantle it or to make any arrangements for their furniture, or for their future residence. They just returned to London, anxious, for the time, to be among friends and, above all things, away from the immediate scene of their sorrow.

They had a large circle of friends in

town and as soon as they were once settled in their house, the visits of condolence they received were numerous. Mrs. Hamerton refused herself to all but very intimate friends, for she was daily realising more deeply that she had indeed lost her favourite daughter. But Jessie was often in the drawing-room, looking more delicately pretty than ever, in her deep mourning, and with a certain unwonted faintness of colour. But she grew brighter steadily; for most constant of all their visitors was James Pauncefort. He was more in love with Jessie than ever; and so he gave her no peace. She seemed to have inspired a *grande passion* indeed, to judge by the heat of her lover's pursuit. Her name was ever on his lips, when he was not with her. His fellow-clerks had all been regaled with a full and detailed

account of his love-affair, which perhaps Jessie might not have approved had she known it. Ignorance is bliss in some things.

Jessie was a creature of details, of trifles, of airy nothings. Here James pleased her. Stingy as he was at heart, he managed to poke and pry about until he found little presents which just delighted her. His conversation, too, was easy and intelligible. Sometimes it set her yawning a little; for the Paunceforts were rare prosers. But it never strained or exhausted her mind; his subject and his mode of dealing with it always lay pleasantly within her powers of understanding.

And so, after a period of over-strained nervousness, Jessie found his society a relaxation. She was quite as much in love as such a girl generally is when she

marries. These two young people might have looked very happy and very romantic to any outsider peering through the drawing-room window on a certain summer evening. The sun had just set (not that these lovers had paid any attention to the wonderful lights and colours which had, for a while, made London itself picturesque); the curtains excluded much of what light remained, and the long room looked dim. It was just the sort of dimness which gives suggestions of beauty to an ordinary room; mellowing the ugly colours and making the harsh lines half invisible. On a couch beside one of the windows sat Jessie and James Pauncefort, reading out of one book, like lovers in a picture.

What a halo youth and health cast around the most commonplace people!

Jessie looked delicately radiant, while James, his eyes more often upon her than upon his book, wore an air of pride and self-complacency that upon an upright, masculine figure did duty very well for nobility.

Neither of them was fond of reading, but the book had just been presented to Jessie with much ceremony; and therefore must of course be carefully inspected and made the most of. Both were naturally of an economic turn, and they made the very most of little things.

Presently a step was heard approaching the door, and Jessie imperatively motioned James to betake himself away to a chair a little distance from her. But the man did not share her sensitive feelings; indeed he seemed rather to like showing off as the possessor of her affections; and the only

result of Jessie's indignant frowns and an angry flush in her cheeks was that he came, if possible, an inch nearer. So Jessie herself, just in time, landed herself on the chair, and pretended, with a very flurried air, to be desperately absorbed in her precious book. The door opened and the servant entered and handed Jessie a card. She cast her eyes on it and exclaimed,

"Professor Venn! Why, that is cousin Ernest! We have not seen him for ages—show him up, and run and tell mamma."

"Why, this is cousin Jessie," said an echoing voice at her elbow, "a great deal taller than when I saw her last."

Jessie looked hastily round, and found that the visitor had immediately followed the servant. He stood, hat in hand, at her

side, smiling a little—a very little, for Professor Venn seldom smiled broadly—upon his blonde cousin. He was her very opposite; a little like Mr. Hamerton, but of a superior type. He was the child of Mr. Hamerton's much elder sister; belonging to a generation that stood between Jessie and her father. A man who looked perhaps taller than he really was, by reason of his spareness; a man who impressed you by his individuality at once, not through any power of personal appearance, but rather by the quiet self-contained force of his manner and attitude. Neither Jessie nor her lover were keen observers, yet they both felt something of this; and both were conscious, too, of being looked through and comprehended. Jessie knew perfectly well that her cousin's dark penetrative eyes had noticed her attitude when he entered the

room, that he knew she had but just started from that seat upon the sofa, which seemed so patently left vacant by James's side, as her guilty eyes fell upon it.

"Mamma will be so delighted to see you again," said she, a little timidly. "I hope papa will not be out long; he will be so disappointed if he misses you."

"I saw the notice — " a glance at Jessie's mourning dress made anything more definite unnecessary—"when we were in Paris, on our way home; and as soon as we arrived in town I called on the Leightons to find out where you were living. We have only been in town two days, Sibyl and I; I suppose you have been here longer?"

They sat down on two gossip-chairs, to talk; James, still on his couch, a little distance off, glared at Professor Venn. He

had not been introduced; Jessie was confused and left it for her mother to do; so, after the fashion of young Englishmen, he found it his duty to glare at the other man.

Jessie felt this, and became more embarrassed; even Professor Venn's singularly quiet and unconscious manner could not set her at her ease; and she welcomed her mother's entrance with delight.

Mr. Hamerton came in a few minutes afterwards; and Jessie, with a reproachful look at her lover for making her blush so much, left the room under cover of the others' talk. He followed her immediately, and they quarrelled all the way downstairs, only to make it up in the breakfast-room, where it was dark enough for Jessie's cheeks to cool.

"Why should you let everybody see?"

asked poor Jessie. "Why not treat me sometimes with a little distant dignity? It is so childish to keep so close to me, so that the very servants laugh at us. It is, really—don't you see it?"

"No, I don't," said James, "and I should like to catch a servant laughing at me!" with vast dignity.

"You are a great nuisance," said Jessie, pouting; then she laughed at her own indignation, and it was all over.

"Is my pretty cousin engaged to that young gentleman?" asked Professor Venn as soon as the door had fairly closed upon the pair.

"Yes," said Mrs. Hamerton. "How did you guess?"

"Easily," said he, with his smile which came in when another man would have laughed. "When people are engaged they

are quite different from what they are at any other period of their lives. I think it is a very wretched time. Who is the happy man? I have not been introduced to him."

"James Pauncefort is his name," replied Mr. Hamerton. "He seems a decent young fellow, though *I* should not have fallen in love with him. He is a clerk in a bank with some prospects in the background. It is not a particularly good match, but they are set on it."

"Then let them carry it through," said Professor Venn. "People must go their own way in order to learn the lessons of this life properly. As we grow old we are surprised to find that our experience is of no use to the young ones around us; but of course it is not, else they would have no hard lessons to be educated by.

This world will never improve, you see, because as soon as any one becomes superior to it in its present state, he goes out of it."

"You always had an odd way of looking at things," said Mrs. Hamerton, a little plaintively. "I see no reason why this should not be a happy marriage for Jessie."

"Nor I," answered the Professor, "because I know nothing of him. I was merely maintaining that it is an advantage to let each individual life shape itself as far as possible."

Mrs. Hamerton opened her eyes a little. Mr. Hamerton, who was standing with his elbow on the mantelpiece, looked down at them with his somewhat faded smile and changed the current of the talk.

"Are you expecting to remain at home for any time, Ernest?"

"Yes," said Professor Venn, turning towards him; "I have no engagements abroad just now; and indeed when I go again I am afraid I must leave Sibyl behind, provided I can find a pleasant home for her. The travelling about has knocked her up rather of late."

"She is not strong?" questioned Mrs. Hamerton. "You know we have never seen her."

"Ah! no more you have; and we have been married three years. I suppose then that I have not met you for quite four, have I? She is not strong, though not exactly out of health. She is very easily overtired; I think that is all. Her constitution is peculiarly delicate. But I must bring her to see you."

"Come to dinner to-morrow, and bring her," said Mrs. Hamerton.

That was settled, and Professor Venn having an engagement left almost immediately.

CHAPTER VII.

SIBYL.

"I heed not that my earthly lot
Hath little of earth in it."

Edgar Allan Poe.

"She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years."

Wordsworth.

"I REALLY can't make up my mind where to settle down," said Professor Venn. "Sibyl hates London as heartily as I do, and yet we like to be within an easy run of town, as I often have to come up. But the suburbs are even worse than London itself."

They were standing, he and Mr. Hamerton, by the mantelpiece in the Hamertons' drawing-room, after dinner. Mrs. Hamerton sat on a low chair just within range of their conversation; Mrs. Venn sat near her looking over some engravings with Jessie, and James stood behind their chairs, wearing a somewhat martyred expression of countenance. He liked having his beloved object altogether to himself. Jessie had told him he might stay away to-night, which of course had brought him, in a state of jealousy; so the evening, staid enough otherwise, was diversified by the undercurrent of quarrelsomeness between the lovers.

"Sandville is the sort of place you would like, I think," said Mrs. Hamerton, looking up after a little pause. "We liked it very much; and one feels to be near

town, because there are express trains. Some such place as that, where there is country-town life, and yet where you can easily spend a day in London, seems to be what you want."

"Just so," said the Professor, "I should like that, I think. Is the country pleasant around Sandville?"

"Oh! lovely," put in Jessie, "and the town is so picturesque."

"You say there are express trains? I must run down and look at the place. Anything attracts me, you see, for I have no idea where to go, and yet I want to get settled soon, for both our sakes. Sibyl is tired of wandering, and I want a room for experiments sadly. I can do nothing except in my own house, as people always imagine I shall blow them up."

Mr. Hamerton laughed. After a little

pause Professor Venn said, "Are there good houses around Sandville? Should I have any difficulty in getting one, do you think?"

"I really don't know. Laham Court is a capital house and very comfortable."

"I am sure I was charmed with it," said Mrs. Hamerton plaintively. "I thought I should settle there for the rest of my days."

"And shall you not return there, by-and-bye?"

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "I could not bear to go there again; you see there are no associations connected with it, for any of us, but those of Stella's death. She began to sink almost immediately on our arrival there."

"Well," said Professor Venn, after a pause, "how would it be if we took it

off your hands? Supposing we like it,—would that suit you?"

"I should be very glad to be freed of it so easily," said Mr. Hamerton, "as my wife feels she cannot return there. I think you would like it."

"What do you say, Sibyl? shall we go down to see it?"

Jessie had raised her head some time ago, to listen to the talk; but Mrs. Venn had gone on absently turning over the engravings. She looked up now, and smiled rather languidly in answer to her husband's questioning look.

"I should like to," she said, "if it is not too far from town for you."

Sibyl Venn's voice struck you the first time you heard it. It was very low, yet clear, and with a tone of unearthliness about it. It lacked the warm natural

energy to which our ears are accustomed; although it was not thin nor wanting in power of a certain kind. Her form shared the same characteristics; she had evidently come of a fine stock, for her figure was of beautiful balance and proportion, and her movements indicated latent power; yet she was wanting in the vigorous physical life which would have made her a fine woman to ordinary eyes. No evidence or sign of disease or ill-health appeared in her clear eyes and pale translucent complexion. All was pure and fair; but the lover of physical or, rather, of sensuous beauty passed her by as wanting in that something which would have made her appreciable to him. At the same time there was a faint, delicate magic or charm about her which brought around her a court of her own. The few

women whom she admitted to intimacy, and the few men who penetrated to her inner circle of sympathy, never deserted her. She held them by a power as strong as it was invisible. It was a power exercised in complete unconsciousness; she did not know that her rare atmosphere had already attracted Jessie to her side. Jessie, radiant and blushing, found a pleasant sense of shelter in the presence of this fair maiden-like matron. She was conscious when Professor Venn looked at his wife, that Sibyl's romance was not over because she was married. She wondered whether it would be so with her; for Jessie had not yet got over the very girlish idea that marriage is of necessity at the end of the three volumes.

The Professor's eyes wandered back to

his wife's face once or twice after she had spoken, before he said anything.

She had returned to her engravings, thinking, seemingly, that she had disposed of the subject; but Professor Venn would have liked a rather more decided answer. The indecision did not lie in the words; Sibyl had evidently roused herself to speak with interest; but it was plain that the matter only touched her superficially.

Professor Venn approached a step nearer to her, and said, in a rather lower tone, "Will you go down with me to-morrow? Do you really like the idea?"

"I wonder," thought Mrs. Hamerton to herself, "whether they get on well? She seems absent, and he rather pertinacious, almost fidgetty, in his way."

But a moment after, her wonderings came to a conclusion. Sibyl raised her

head with a movement peculiar to her (as though she threw aside her own thoughts and awakened herself to the matter in hand), and with a beautiful smile, without any languor in it, sent her eyes, clear and true and brilliant, straight into her husband's.

"Yes, I do like it," was all she said. But he stepped back with a satisfied look and Mrs. Hamerton sat still, amazed at the clear love-light she had caught a glimpse of.

"I suppose you will have to give me an order to get into Laham Court?" said the Professor to Mrs. Hamerton.

"I will give it you now," said Mr. Hamerton, evidently pleased at the ready chance of getting rid of his house, "and then we shan't forget it."

He went away to his desk, and Professor

Venn sat down by his hostess, and began to talk on general matters; keeping an eye meanwhile on Sibyl.

"I think we must go," he said after some quarter of an hour more of talk; "I know it is not late, but I can see Sibyl is very tired. She has been into the City with me to-day, and I know I must take her home early."

Everybody of course expostulated; but he was quite determined; and wrapping his wife carefully in a great crimson shawl, which made her look more delicate and dreamy than ever, he carried her off.

Of course there were criticisms passed on this newly-seen member of the family as soon as they were gone. The women were enthusiastic. "She scarcely speaks to one," said Jessie; "and yet one seems

to know her and care for her directly. I wonder how it is? But there is something which makes one feel half afraid to touch her for fear she would not like it."

The men were cool on the subject. James decidedly preferred people less ethereal, and more blooming, and, above all, who liked being touched. Mr. Hamerton did not see what they found to say so much about. The girl had no life in her. Meantime, Professor Venn took his tired wife home to their hotel, and waited on her like a nurse. Sibyl was one of those people who can go on enduring like a Spartan while it is necessary, but the moment restraint is ended, break down and give way entirely. Often after an evening of bright conversation, when even his eye had not detected her weariness, he would have

almost to carry her to her room, so lifeless would she become under extreme exhaustion. She did not faint, but her life would appear to escape from her. At first it had thrilled him with horror to feel the pulse that momently seemed to cease, to feel the lifeless limbs, to meet the eyes open and awake, yet void of intelligence. But he had learned now how to recall her vitality; and though still he was constantly anxious, yet he had grown partly accustomed to her strange states, which he imagined to result from a sort of partial or imperfect hold upon physical life.

He often felt that her material semblance was in a sense inadequate—he often felt that she herself was not wholly with him, not wholly present in that material semblance. He was dimly conscious of a Sibyl who lay dormant behind

this exterior, a being that was only sometimes revealed to himself, and never, as he believed, to others.

Physically she was hardly the wife for him. He needed something robuster. She was somewhat of a fetter upon him; for his mode of life involved a good deal of moving about. He was a distinguished electrician; and his engagements often took him abroad. He found that this, which was delightful to himself, almost killed Sibyl. Other causes than those of ordinary fatigue conduced to this.

Sibyl's mind habitually dwelt in its own pure and gentle atmosphere; it shrank with horror from many of the realities of the world; it was crushed by them if they became too apparent. General society was a deep infliction to her; and thus she was almost incapable of furthering any

ends of his by entering it, as he would often have wished.

He had learned to treat her as he treated a very delicate instrument. And he had come to regard her much in that light. He loved her so entirely that he never dreamed he could live without her; yet her peculiar constitution placed her in a different state from that in which he lived.

Her love for him was a remote, a rare, an ethereal love; as he gradually grew to realise this, and that no power of his could bring it into a more terrestrially appreciable state, his own affection for her had become, perhaps, a shade more paternal in quality—a degree less lover-like.

Apart from all this, Sibyl was of value to him. Her intuitions often amazed him.

Never were they nearer to each other or more united than when he took some problem to her—something which perplexed him in the course of his constant studies. A remark of hers would sometimes bring him a flood of light; yet Sibyl did not study, and often seemed incapable of grasping a subject, or taking any interest in it. She read widely, but her mind was not adapted to studious habits; and it would have been an impossibility to her to have followed her husband through his researches, even if he had devoted himself to explana tion. He had early found this out, and had not expected that class of companionship or aid since his marriage. Before it, he had looked for something of the kind, for Sibyl's brow indicated mind and thought. But he found that the action of her mind was a thing utterly opposed to anything in him-

self: though he reverenced it, because he saw the value of its results, yet he failed to understand it. He cared more for Sibyl than for anything else on the face of the earth. Yet Sibyl was to him a mystery, and sometimes, in her relations with him, almost a disappointment.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TERRIBLE OLD LADY.

"A man cannot speak, but he judges himself. With his will or against his will, he draws his portrait to the eye of his companions by every word."—*Emerson.*

WHILE James was carrying on his courtship with characteristic pertinacity in London, his mother brooded and sulked over her indignation down at Sandville. Dr. Hetley led rather a wretched life of it just now. He was seldom allowed to pass an hour at home, out of his study, without a small exposition of some kind, upon James's short comings, or Jessie's unsuitability. The subject became wearisome in time; for it

lasted longer than any other ever had lasted. He had it represented to him in every possible light, by James from his point of view, by his mother from hers. Although he did not listen, yet when things are constantly repeated, they have a way of hiding themselves in secret nooks of the brain, and playing at bo-peep with the proper residents therein. He found himself, after a period of having these ideas continually hammered into him, unconsciously considering Jessie Hamerton's capacity as a housekeeper, as he stood beside sick-beds. The narrowness of James's income, and the paramount necessity that his wife should be an excellent manager, and the question how much Mr. Hamerton would allow Jessie during his life, would even enter his mind when he endeavoured to rest it by turning to pleasant thoughts.

Dr. Hetley's life was at this time growing

more difficult and less agreeable, and he began to rebel.

His practice was rapidly increasing; and with it his ambition. Humanity and philanthropy began to give way before continually sleepless nights, and unceasingly hard-working days; it needed ambition to pull him up at the sound of the night-bell. As his patients came thick and fast they merged into one another, and unconsciously there grew up in his mind a tendency to look upon them rather as his subjects to work upon, his instruments, his stepping-stones, than as individual sufferers to whom he was to give himself. Man is but man; and most people grow more prosaic as they grow older, and more immersed in the "business" (that terrible modern word) of life.

"The youth, who farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature's priest,
And by the vision splendid,
Is on the way attended;
At length the man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day."

Probably Dr. Hetley had only arrived at this stage which the poet-seer speaks of as the common lot of man. His cognisance of the depths and heights of the inner life of the soul was narrowing, by pressure of the aridity of daily life. His attention was, by force of habit, becoming fixed upon the lower details of existence; and so it lost sight of the splendid vision which had as yet lent a certain vague glory to his ideas and aspirations. Life was tamer to him than it had ever been; an imaginative on-looker might suppose that a flash from a woman's eyes

had opened to him a certain unknown possibility which now had altogether gone from his future; and that a dim intuition of this had driven him deeper into ordinary selfish life.

But Dr. Hetley's was hardly an intuitive nature; more probably the cause of this inner change was the fact that he was gradually settling into middle life; shaking himself down, mentally speaking; broadening out, physically speaking. The ladies of the neighbourhood were disposed to begin calling him an old bachelor, instead of a young one. And he, as he was a little less thought of as "eligible," began to turn his thoughts towards marriage.

He considered that in a year or a little more, he would have a sufficient income to marry comfortably upon; and as he grew to value freedom rather less

than he had done, the idea of some fine woman, with glowing life and joyous animal spirits, taking the place of Mrs. Pauncefort in his home, became a rather fascinating one. Coming home might be a jolly thing then.

Surely it would not be a difficult matter for the doctor to have his wishes gratified; for he was not looking out for any ideal woman; he only wanted something pretty, something pleasant, something agreeable, to add to the charms of physical well-being.

He looked round for this something; but he did not find it all at once in any lady of his acquaintance; at all events, not in perfection. So the days went by and he did nothing, save grow more surly under the inflictions of his aunt's gossip and tempers than he used to be; and

look oftener at the *petite* face and figure of a seamstress who plied her sewing machine diligently at a window opposite his house.

Dr. Hetley's house, as we know, was in the main street, a constant grievance to Mrs. Pauncefort; for though she could not exist without the bustle and life of a street to look out upon, yet she desired that the street and the bustle should be aristocratic, and suitable for her to take a dignified interest in.

Instead of which, "over the way" meant the butcher and baker and candlestick maker; only a few trees screened the doctor's windows from these plebeian neighbours; and, nearly opposite, was the principal linendraper's. At the side of the shop was evidently a dressmaker's room; though Mrs. Pauncefort had never

deigned to ascertain. In the window all day, save on Saturday afternoons and Sundays, sat a demure bright-eyed girl, small and slight, and most people would think unattractive.

Yet the doctor found something to look at in her, and gradually the seamstress became one of his daily objects of interest. A certain gay independence in the pale little face pleased him; and he often strolled down the garden and looked across. Many years of work and respectability had almost blotted out the medical student days; when he would have immediately expressed his feelings by an appropriate serenade. It did not occur to him now that he *could* be anything but respectable—when at home; so that he very innocently allowed his interest in the little woman over the way to grow.

One evening he came home in the twilight; and the seamstress was just lighting her room. He lingered at the gate to observe her; so long that at last an impatient tap-tap of imperative, high-heeled shoes came down the garden path.

"Dear me," exclaimed Mrs. Pauncefort. "I declare there's that horrid girl again. I'm quite sick of seeing her. I wonder she don't tire of showing herself off everlastingly at that window. I've a letter from James, Leonard; and what do you think? There is a chance of Laham Court being let again. James was at the Hamertons' one evening, when a cousin of Mr. Hamerton's and his wife were there, and proposed coming down to see the house, with a view of taking it."

"Oh! indeed," replied Leonard, his eyes

still idly fixed upon the "horrid girl," who however, at this moment drew down her blind. There was a moment's silence.

"Well," said Mrs. Pauncefort; "they can't go to the house (unless they walk by the fields, but that's a long way) without passing *here;* I wonder what day they will come?" she added thoughtfully.

"I regret I can't help you to find out," replied her nephew, as she appeared to pause for a reply; and then he unconcernedly walked off and left her.

"Getting positively bearish," said she sadly to herself; "poor Leonard! what a pity I haven't a daughter for him to marry, a great pity; for Leonard has talents and good qualities, if he were not so untrained. He is growing quite peculiar."

Mrs. Pauncefort delighted in ordinary people. She revelled in the commonplace. Peculiarity was as a red rag to her; she was incapable of tolerance for other people's ideas. When it is so easy to be respectable, and do as others do, what excuse have people for not doing so?

For the next two days Mrs. Pauncefort was uncomfortable. It was a religious duty with her to take a walk every day; for the purpose of preserving her health. But now she did not like going out, because she wanted to see every-one that went by, and wonder whether they were going to Laham Court.

Her curiosity was gratified at last; for one day, as she was emerging from the garden gate, she heard a gentleman close beside her asking the way to Laham Court.

She turned and saw Professor Venn and his wife, who were making inquiries of a labourer. The man was rather dull, and as is common with the uneducated classes, found it extremely difficult to give an intelligible direction.

Mrs. Pauncefort looked at them and decided at once that they were the people whom James had described. She stepped nearer, and in her high, unmodulated voice—(a voice with outlines, was Mrs. Pauncefort's; you had no doubts as to when she commenced and when she ceased speaking)—offered to show the way. The Venns came towards her and she led them down the road to a turning where she could show them how to get across the fields. Meantime, as Professor Venn appeared to her discriminating eye a sufficiently gentlemanly man, and as Sibyl

seemed quiet and inoffensive, she introduced herself as James's mother, and made friends on the spot, by speaking of their mutual acquaintance with the Hamertons.

Professor Venn was polite; and Mrs. Pauncefort, the interview over, went off, mightily delighted, to call on a friend and tell her all about it.

"Oh! Ernest," exclaimed Mrs. Venn, as they walked away, "what a terrible old lady!"

"She is rather warlike in appearance," replied her husband, "but I dare say she is not so alarming in reality. So that will be little Jessie's mother-in-law."

"I hope they will never quarrel," laughed Sibyl. "I am sure poor Jessie would be crushed. Was not the doctor

that they sent for to Stella some relation of the Paunceforts?"

"Yes; a very clever man, he is considered to be. I must make some more inquiries as to that, for I prefer to be near a doctor with some sense while you are so delicate. The country is pretty, Sibyl, I rather take to this place."

The sun was setting behind Laham Court as they approached it; and the glorious sky lent the place an additional charm.

They entered and wandered over the house. Sibyl sat down in most of the rooms and tried to feel at home in them. She was in one of her gay moods; and Ernest Venn was delighted to find the place pleased her. He wandered away from her, after a while, to explore some outer regions; she had not done looking

at all the rooms upstairs. Ere long he returned to look for her, and found her sitting in the window of the room we know as Stella's room. Her mood had changed. She looked faint and pale, and he was alarmed at once lest she had done too much. But she smiled as he approached her.

"We shall live here, Ernest," she said, "I am sure of it; and I shall have this room. How pretty the avenue looks from this window, does it not?"

"I am glad you like it," he said, "I think myself it will just suit us."

They sat a while by the window, till the sun had all but gone, and the shadows came in and filled the room. Sibyl shivered.

"Come, we must go," said her husband,

"you are overtired already, and we have to get home."

They went—Sibyl casting a lingering look back into the shadowy room.

CHAPTER IX.

SHE WAS ABSENT — YET NOT ONLY AS WE ORDINARY MORTALS ARE ABSENT.

"Blank misgivings of a creature
Moving about in worlds not realised."

Wordsworth.

"*Astrologos.* Cut just one link of the great chain centripetal,
And there's an end of the enormous universe.
Alouette. Tell me which link, papa; I'll get my scissors out."

'*The Comedy of Dreams.*' *Mortimer Collins.*

"And as I slept I dreamed a dream."

'*Pilgrim's Progress.*'

"ALAS! you are amidst it all again, Ernest. Warring with the blind forces of nature, trying to compel her to be your

servant. I can never come in here but I ask myself—is it worth while?"

Sibyl Venn had quietly opened the door of the electrician's workshop, and stood just inside, silent for a few moments ere she spoke.

"Don't suggest such abominable heresies, Sibyl. When I'm in the very agony of an experiment, I shall infallibly burn off my eyelashes if you come talking to me like that. Worth while? Why, God bless me! is it not something to be master of the world you live in."

"Master!" echoed Sibyl in a tone of contempt. "Why, the world's not made of gases and precious stones. We don't notice them unless our attention is attracted to them. It rather consists of emotions, sympathies, thoughts, aspirations.

Your experiments produce no result upon my inner life."

Ernest Venn looked up, and for a moment gazed at his wife, and left his experiment to itself.

"Is it nothing to have conquered that mysterious force electricity, and to have made it our servant? Is it nothing to have made a blind force the messenger of our thoughts, and the slave of our highest wish?"

"Nothing!" answered Sibyl boldly. She was in one of her rare controversial moods, when she let some of her ideas see the light. She crossed the room and leaned against the window, looking for a moment upon the garden without before she went on. Meantime, Ernest Venn was urgently called back to his operations.

They were now settled at Laham Court, and both were happy, for a brief season. Professor Venn gloried in his workshop; Sibyl delighted in the garden and the country; and both gained hourly pleasure from the quiet enjoyment of each other's society.

"Nothing!" repeated Sibyl. "The devotion of men's lives to these things should obtain higher results. What can fetter spirit save its own ignorance? We ought to be able to communicate without the necessity of using wires and telegraph clerks."

"Mesmerism?"

"Oh! no; because then one obtains power over another. It is the strong that should communicate with the strong."

"Can't be done; your theories always rest on the idea that man as a whole can

be raised. The thing is impossible. Man as a whole is stationary; man as an individual is progressive. All humanitarian projects which rest on the supposition that the entire inhabitants of the globe can be improved fall to the ground; and rightly enough. What we have to do is to ameliorate the conditions of this temporary state; but it is evident that every person requires the same class of experience from this state, and therefore they will be unable to grasp any higher class of experience."

"And you can reconcile yourself to a life's work devoted to the amelioration of a temporary state? I don't think you realise it as temporary, Ernest, or you wouldn't be so interested in its conditions. Now I *do* realise it as temporary; and therefore I feel these things to be of a

certain value, but altogether subordinate. I don't believe it would make any difference to my inner growth to be satisfied or not whether a diamond were pure carbon."

"Your spiritual theorising brings you to the mental condition of a Methodist or Puritan. We must not slur our path, because our foremost aim is to continually walk on."

"But why stop walking to look at the things upon the wayside?"

"It seems to me that unless we expand as we go on, and fully live the life we have at our disposal at each moment, we shall be unable to fully live the perfect life, whatever that may be, when we arrive at it."

"No," said Sibyl, "because the perfect life must be all good. And the imperfect lives we pass through must necessarily be

partly evil because imperfect. Therefore let us keep our wings close, and only soar when the atmosphere is pure."

"There is no such thing as evil, little woman. The phantasm which we call evil is a mere chisel, a thing by which we are shaped. It hurts us, and makes ugly lines, individually. But wait till you see the whole result, before you pronounce on the intended effect of these lines."

"Their result can never be good," said Sibyl emphatically. "If the pure soul be white and clean, how can black marks improve it?"

"Because they give it strength; the pure soul, unmarked, is but a perishable form of life; like a flower that has no hold upon the black earth. The plant that most deeply strikes its roots down-

wards, most proudly rears its head and climbs toward the stars."

"A fearful idea," exclaimed Sibyl, with a shudder. "The thought hurts me. Surely we do but need good angels to teach us and lead us on into still purer life — we cannot need to grovel in this earth, in order to rise above it? The thing is too terrible."

"Yet why? The earth favours those whom it teaches, however that teaching be obtained, You are so frail, Sibyl, so easily hurt by actual physical conditions that I confess it is difficult to me to see how the earth is to teach *you*, save by mere accession of patience during your physical or nervous sufferings; you appear to me to be too sensitive to be susceptible to the ordinary gross lessons of life. Now with most of us, we can fall into sin and

climb out again; commit a crime and repent of it. I imagine you would die of remorse at the mere idea, or inward prompting, towards sin. Believe me, that is a loss. You cannot appreciate good until you have known evil."

"Oh! don't talk so," cried Sibyl, putting her fingers in her ears. "You are discussing me as if you were a lecturer and I a subject you were experimenting on. And your theory makes me aghast! If I am innocent, God grant I may remain so; and I wish all my fellow-creatures were so likewise, that I might not shrink from touching them. What could I gain by becoming more evil than I am? The thing is monstrous."

"Not becoming more evil—not letting the filth adhere. That is an unfortunate circumstance, which proves, I suppose, that

the soul which thus suffers needs more education than other souls."

"Oh! don't," said Sibyl, with another shudder. "You fill me with repugnance. Surely we do not need to walk backwards."

"Why not? I can conceive a soul enlarged both in height and depth by passing through a dire experience consequent upon its own sin."

"I cannot," said Sibyl; "I don't think it is goodness which I possess; I don't feel good, or at all events I try not to, because that must be wrong. I cannot be good —I am too weak. But I have never done anything wicked, and anything wicked seems to belong to some other, dreadful world."

"You must know that human beings are not divided in that way into the sheep and the goats. We are all tarred with

the same stick. Perhaps a soul infinitely more noble than ourselves might commit, and not ultimately suffer from, a sin which we might abhor. Sibyl, there is ice somewhere in your composition. A woman so full of goodness as you are should have infinite charity for those less good."

He spoke almost irritably. There was a pause, during which he put aside the things he had been busy upon, and made a note of the results of his experiment. Sibyl looked out upon the gathering twilight and sighed. His memoranda made, he approached her. She looked up and spoke impulsively, and like a woman.

"I would be wicked if I thought you would love me any better, Ernest; but, then, I don't think you would."

"Nonsense, child; I don't believe you are so dependent on my love. You are

tired just now, and a woman all over; but a short half hour will change you into the being which perplexes me; you will be confident in your intuitive knowledge of right; these words of yours will be as the words of some unknown person. Sibyl," and he caught her arm, "shall I ever understand you? Shall we ever see each other face to face? At times I feel that you are as far from me as if I had never seen you. I have your body here, but where—where is your spirit, Sibyl? You don't answer me; you are not near me."

He released his hold upon her, and looked at her sadly. She was *absent* —yet not only as we ordinary mortals are absent. She was unable to arouse herself —to break the charm and become *herself* again. Ernest Venn knew the signs of

this dim seizure too well to be alarmed. Yet sometimes a horror would come across him, that he would lose his wife, not by death but by an increase of this state, which, he argued, must terminate in madness. The thought passed through his mind even now, and his eyes, as they rested upon her, were full of a strange mixture of emotions. A smile from Sibyl would have relieved his anxiety immediately; but no, her gaze was vacant and unresponsive. Yet, although she was cold and unconscious of his touch, her brow was knit as if thought were still alive. She was leaning against the window, but her frame momently grew more fluid and helpless. Ernest lifted her to an arm-chair, into which she sank helplessly.

"What shall I do?" he exclaimed. "When I try to arouse her she is ill for

days afterwards. No; I must let the curse work its own way. My poor Sibyl. Did I bring this upon you? You cannot bear to be thought wanting; you reproach yourself instantly. Why do I talk of such things?"

He stopped suddenly and leaned forward. Her lips were moving slightly. He just caught a few words as they dropped slowly from her lips:—

"Deep—deep—down,
Through caverns of ice and snow,
Hasting in terrible anguish,
Into the cold I go:
'Tis to my own heart's centre
That I hasten away,
Where no sunbeams enter
All the livelong day!"

"Sibyl, Sibyl," cried Ernest Venn, throwing his arms around her, "this is

the keenness of your imagination. Forgive my words, Sibyl. Wake and banish this idea in the warmth of your love for me."

His words had no effect. Sibyl was unconscious of his presence, although her brain was evidently not unconscious.

Suddenly she sat upright and motionless. To one who had witnessed the mesmeric state, as Ernest Venn frequently had, her appearance suggested that. But she was under no influence; he had exercised no power over her, save that he had rather directed his will towards recalling her from this state.

He drew back from her a little, and observed her.

Her face was turned in one direction as if she saw something that attracted her; but her eyes were closed.

After a minute or so he called her by name, but without effect. She was unaware of his presence apparently.

At last her lips again moved. In a whisper she commenced to speak, but she spoke so rapidly that he could scarcely understand her. But he gathered that she was endeavouring to describe visions of flowers and radiant faces, which made her almost start from her chair as if she desired to grasp and retain the forms that came and went so quickly. A long while he sat and listened quietly to her half incoherent words, which conveyed to his mind a vague idea of beautiful flitting forms and colours.

But presently her words ceased for a moment, and then she resumed, in a voice of terror,

"Ah! I can see a great dark sea,

all tossing, in black billows and white foam! There are faces in the waves; faces of men and women; men and women are there—drowning! Oh! they keep being beaten against the rocks—against the cruel rocks. What can this mean? Why are they not helped? Oh! why is there none to help them?"

She paused and waited with intense listening face, as though endeavouring to understand something difficult of comprehension.

How well he knew that expression! When his wife's soul appeared to have passed from out his world, this came upon her face; when she seemed to rise upon some wings of apprehension or imagination which were denied to him.

"Ah! I see there are those who would help them, but they do not understand; they

do not look up; they are blind. They seek only the shore—the immediate goal; and so they choose to dash against the rocks, instead of rising out of the nightmare they struggle in, as the angels would have them do!"

Again she paused, but presently, in a dim and powerless voice, she said,

"What does it mean? I cannot tell. A whisper is striving to tell me, but I cannot hear. And yet — yes — it says these people suffer because they are selfish, and cannot either look up, or unite with their fellow-sufferers — and am I selfish — and in my purity and isolation from sin as self-seeking and therefore as sinning as they? Oh! God, is this the lesson taught me? Who teaches me? where am I?"

Suddenly, before Ernest had the faintest

expectation of any change—she fell to the ground, straight and rigid. He was at her side in an instant. The twilight had departed and the room was dark now, so that he could not see her face. He felt it. He felt her hands—cold and stiff. He found his way to the bell and rang violently.

A servant came running and they laid Sibyl on a bed, and used all means to restore her; but though after some time, her breathing became regular, her hands warm, and her eyes opened, yet there was a terrible vacancy in them, and a tendency to relapse into unconsciousness, which kept her husband by her side all the evening and half the night.

He thought, as he sat there, of Dr. Hetley. Should he go to this man, who was making a great reputation—should he

go to him and tell him all that he could make intelligible, and place Sibyl in his hands. He lived near; he could watch her.

CHAPTER X.

"PERHAPS I AM NOT THE SAME PERSON?"

"Sleep, deep,
Newborn may-be in unremembered dreams,
Where on thine eyes morn ing splendour streams;
Sleep, deep,—to wake seems deeper sleep!"
'Purpose and Passion.' Keningale Cook.

PROFESSOR VENN sat awaiting his wife's arrival at the breakfast-table, and looking over the letters meantime. It was a glorious morning; the sunlight had danced in at Sibyl's window and awakened her; and in answer to Ernest's anxious inquiries, she declared she felt quite well—certainly well enough to get up and go out into that sunshine.

He was just beginning to think of going to see whether dressing had been too much for her, when she came in through the open French window. Sibyl's hair was bright bronze in the sunshine, and her pellucid complexion was not afraid of the strong light; often she looked the incarnation of youth and gaiety on such a morning as this. But to-day the sun brought no glow to her cheeks; she was intensely pale, and her eyes wore a dim and harassed look as if they could not see plainly.

Ernest involuntarily rose to meet her, and almost unthinkingly the words escaped him. "You are very tired with last night, poor child."

"Tired with last night? Why? I fainted, didn't I? I am so sorry you should have had to nurse me again?"

"Don't you remember?" he asked.

"Have you forgotten the visions you saw?"

Sybil had just seated herself behind the coffee-pot, and was moving her hands among the cups and saucers and various breakfast paraphernalia as he spoke. She paused and turned her eyes upon him with a gaze of unaffected astonishment.

"I don't know what you are talking of," she said in a bewildered way. "*I* saw no visions!"

He looked keenly at her. Should he tell her all about it, and give added thoughts of distress to that already sufficiently introspective mind? No; rather would he endeavour to lead it away into more natural and happy thoughts.

He easily changed the conversation, for Sibyl was absent and seemed hardly to

notice. But presently he observed her put her hand to her forehead.

"What is it, Sibyl?"

"I remember something of it now. I can remember the feeling I had. Oh! how miserable I was!"

"Don't think about it; you are tired this morning. Come, let us go out and see if the pigeons will come down to us for their breakfast."

He took her to the window, and scattered bread crumbs on the gravel in front of it. They had bought some beautiful white tumbler pigeons, and were endeavouring to tame them and get them used to their new home.

The excitement was great, and Sibyl soon was lost in it. The young birds came in couples on to a verandah near by, and looked longingly down at the meal prepared

for them. Half-a-dozen times they spread their wings to descend, and yet failed of their courage; but at last one bird, who was born to be a leader of the mob, made up his mind and bravely swooping down into the centre of the crumbs, began immediately to peck away at them. The others followed confidently; and all the little white heads bobbed up and down in concert.

Sibyl looked on in ecstasy, and forgot breakfast and visions and all in her delight.

Looking down at her, as she sat upon the shallow window-sill to gaze upon her new pets, Ernest Venn found it difficult to believe that this gay, child-like woman was the weird and almost terrible being of the night before. And yet perhaps that very child-like delight in the pleasant natural details which surrounded her, was not in

discord but in harmony with the deeply sensitive disposition which she appeared to possess. Her sympathy with animals and plants was keen to a degree which to many would appear fanciful.

However difficult it was, even during their travels, she could not endure to be without growing plants in her room; and unlike their fate in the hands of many ladies, they flourished gratefully under her care. She loved to touch them, to lay the living fern-fronds against her face; to caress the flower-blossoms as they opened, and they did not resent this treatment from her.

The birds flew off altogether when the crumbs were all gone; and then their owners went back to breakfast. This was finished gaily, for Sibyl's eyes had caught a sparkle from the sunlight.

"Now I must go into the kitchen," said she. "I'm sure I don't know what to have for dinner."

"Neither do I; so I should suggest our having none at all."

"You wouldn't like that when the time came, Professor Venn. I must think of something before I go; it is so ridiculous not to have an idea. And the worst of it is if I go ready armed with ideas, cook never finds they will do."

Sibyl looked genuinely distressed. Housekeeping was new to her, and she had no gift for it. She kept house well, because she was exceedingly sensitive to any other person's discomfort. She made every one comfortable and contented, even — this sounds like magic, but none the less is true —her servants. But she did it by a continuous struggle. Her natural tendency

would be to forget that food, or any such mundane thing, was needed.

She would have made a charming pre-Raphaelite picture as she stood, in her flowered morning wrapper, turning over the pages of a cookery-book with a despairing air. She was leaning against the door of the little conservatory so that the flowers formed a background behind her. Ernest looked at her with an amused expression.

"Poor little woman, you would like to be a flower yourself and feed on air; wouldn't you?"

"No, because I should not like to have to keep my roots fast in one place. What does it mean, I wonder, that the plants are so rooted? I can't help thinking my dear blossoms will have a finer existence following this, when they will be freed from those roots. Why—yes—I remember,

the other evening my room seemed full of daffodils; they had come to see me of themselves, and they were released from their roots. What gay faces they had!"

Her eyes were growing dreamy. Looking at the flowers of earth, her eyes looked past them.

"If you please, ma'am, the butcher is waiting for orders."

The dreaminess departed from her face, and gave way to an expression of the deepest distress.

"Good-bye," she said, waving her hand to Ernest as she vanished out of the door, on her way to the regions of cooking. "I am going to try and do something useful."

Ernest Venn went up to his laboratory, and forgot all his personal life in the delights of scientific research for some two

or three hours. At the end of that time he was interrupted by sounds which arrested his attention. A gay voice was singing under his window. He went towards it and looked out. Sibyl was below, revelling in the sunshine. He looked curiously at her.

"Last night I deemed her a thing of mystery and doubt; to-day the sun is making her a creature all life and light."

"Have you done your housekeeping?" he asked aloud. She looked up and smiled —a smile of sunshine.

"Yes—done for the day. I have nothing to do but enjoy myself. Oh! Ernest, this place is perfectly delightful. The air is so sweet—and the pony is so restless."

"I understand; well, order lunch early and I'll come out with you for the after-

noon. But first of all explain to me how it is you are so bright to-day. You don't look like the same person that you were yesterday."

"Perhaps I am not the same person. I don't remember yesterday; I live in to-day. I don't know who I was until to-day."

"You are wise to take so little responsibility. It is a pity you are compelled to take more in reality. Your conscience drives you into a responsibility for your actions of yesterday as well as of to-day."

"Not altogether," she answered more gravely. "I think it is too difficult a burden for any one like me to be held responsible for those moments when I am not, as you say, myself. If that phrase means anything, it means that I am not

so fully responsible for my actions. Now I am going to order lunch earlier," and she stepped through the open windows into the house.

The Professor remained in a reverie beside the window.

"If we grant, for the sake of the argument, that the spirit is a thing wholly apart from the body, and merely inhabiting it, or acting upon it, for its own purposes, it is natural to suppose that if the spirit directs its attention elsewhere, the body may come under some other class of influence. This theory might explain some of the phenomena produced by Sibyl's peculiar constitution, though not such as I witnessed last night. *Then* I appeared to be listening to words originated by her own individuality; but that individuality, or spirit, or self, had entered a remote

state—had passed out of communication with me—had obtained communication apparently with some invisible existence. How then did information of her state come to me at all through her body? Was it that the spiritual essence, having only partially entered its own limitless state, retained a hold upon the body which thus dimly echoed its actions? It retained consciousness of itself, which it appears to me to lose when no longer restrained by the body. These are mere suppositions. I have a predisposed subject for experiment at my hand; why not investigate?"

Full of this idea, which had of late been gradually dawning in his mind, he went thoughtfully downstairs. He found Sibyl ready dressed for the drive, and looking radiant. They had a merry lunch, and then started for a long afternoon of exploration in

Sibyl's little carriage, drawn by a shaggy willing pony, and accompanied by the stable-dog which the Hamertons had left behind them. Sibyl made friends of all the animals that came within her sphere; and this dog, whose life had hitherto been devoid of variety, nearly danced himself to death with excitement when he found he was let loose and allowed to race after his new mistress for whole afternoons together. It was a torment to Sibyl to see anything tied up or caged; perhaps no other mode of suffering excited so much sympathy in her breast. Ernest often wondered why this was, and sometimes fancied he had a clue to the reason of it.

They had a glorious afternoon among the hills and woods of one of our sweetest counties. Late in the day they came somewhat slowly through the High Street of

Sandville. The pony had lost some of his exuberance and preferred a quiet jog-trot. Even the big black dog kept by the carriage-side, having given up all those excursions into side-paths, and investigations of hedgerows and cottage-gardens, by which he had given himself so much unnecessary exercise early in the day. Sibyl, leaning back, looked as nearly beautiful physically as she ever did. The sunshine and sweet air that she had drunk in to-day shone at her eyes and lips. She looked with interest at everything they passed. So did her husband, but only from habit; his mind had returned, as they neared home, to the thoughts of the morning.

Trotting slowly through the town they entered unawares into a picture with which we are already familiar; and each saw half of it. Sibyl caught sight of the little

seamstress sitting at her work in the window, and her quick eye appreciated the expression of gay independence and ready intelligence which made the somewhat plain little face noticeable. She turned to look at her again, and so did not see what Professor Venn did see, and that was, Dr. Hetley promenading his garden path, just within the hedge that fenced it from the road, and beneath the trees that screened the house. He paced up and down reflectively, with a look now and then at his blooming rose-bushes, and a look now and then across the road. Into one of these latter looks came the Laham Court pony-carriage, stopping his gaze before it reached the dressmaker.

Now as luck would have it, Mrs. Pauncefort came out of an opposite shop and crossed the road to her own gate right in front

of the pony. Sibyl bowed; but Mrs. Pauncefort stood still, and then came nearer, so Professor Venn stopped the pony. Calls had already been exchanged between the ladies, but the intimacy had not ripened, as neither had been found at home.

"How do you do, Mrs. Venn?" said the old lady in her high, unmodulated voice, coming to Sibyl's side of the carriage. "Excuse my stopping you like this, but I had meant to come over and call on you to-day, though I have not been able. I have not had half an hour to spare. I wanted to ask you—do you take an interest in bazaars?"

Sibyl's ordinary ready politeness deserted her for a moment. She stared blankly at Mrs. Pauncefort. Dr. Hetley, with a sly smile, came to the gate and looked over at the tableau.

Sibyl recovered herself directly, and smiled.

"I am afraid I am of no use in such matters," she answered; "for I don't do fancy work of any kind."

Mrs. Pauncefort must be forgiven for the vulgar exclamation of "Good Gracious!" which escaped her lips, and the open eyes with which she received Sibyl's answer. A young lady who calmly announced that she did no fancy work of any kind was a unique specimen of humanity to Mrs. Pauncefort.

"Dear me," she continued, after a moment's pause in which to recover her breath, "how on earth do you pass your time?"

"My wife has several methods of passing her time," said Ernest Venn gravely, "which I have no doubt are quite as useful."

Mrs. Pauncefort had by this time recovered herself, and without deigning any notice of the last remark, said, with her grim attempt at an ingratiating smile, to Sibyl, "Well, I shall depend on you to take a stall, then, Mrs. Venn."

"Oh! Mrs. Pauncefort, I can't do that sort of thing, indeed! You will lose by me if you give me anything of the kind to do, for I don't understand money or arithmetic, and should never know how to get more for things than they are worth."

Sibyl's voice was so pathetically helpless that her husband burst out laughing, and Dr. Hetley could not help echoing him.

Mrs. Pauncefort turned sharp round.

"Oh! you are there. Allow me to introduce you, as you seem to have joined in the conversation. My nephew, Dr. Hetley, Mrs. Venn—Professor Venn."

Dr. Hetley, composing his countenance, bowed, and opening the gate came out.

"What charming weather we are having," he said, laying hold of the most brilliant and original remark he could think of, in the hurry of his desire to divert his aunt's thoughts from the terrible bazaar.

"You will enjoy the country around here," he went on, speaking to the Professor, but his eyes wandering to Sibyl. He had digested the Professor's appearance already. He liked him. Sibyl he was not sure about; but while they talked together a few moments, he mentally concluded that she was "a pleasant, unaffected little woman; rather intellectual than otherwise."

The Professor, after a little desultory talk, remarked that they would be late for dinner and must go on; so whipping up the little

pony they drove off, the dog scampering and barking from sheer association of ideas, because he was much too tired to be delighted at a fresh start.

"*Well*," said Mrs. Pauncefort, "her incapacity may be real or it may be affected, but any way I don't envy Professor Venn his wife."

"Although," said Dr. Hetley mildly, "a woman *may* perhaps be useful in other ways besides keeping accounts and doing fancy work. Not that I have ever known any who were."

CHAPTER XI.

THE SCIENTIST'S CURIOSITY.

"If there are ghosts to raise,
What shall I call?"

T. L. Beddoes.

"Sleep, sleep:
Pass through the cradles of the rocking foam,
Leave these sad seas whereon dim shadows roam,
Sleep; and find waking nearer home!"

'Purpose and Passion.' Keningale Cook.

ERNEST VENN had made up his mind from what point to commence his investigations of Sibyl's unexplained seizures. A sentence had recurred to his mind which assisted him.

"There are, I suspect, provinces in the philosophy of mind into which metaphysi-

cians have not yet entered. Of that accessible storehouse, in which the memories of past events lie arranged and taped up, they appear to know a good deal; but of a mysterious cabinet of daguerreotype pictures, of which, though fast locked up on ordinary occasions, disease sometimes flings the door ajar, they seem to know nothing."*

This idea offered a rational explanation of such visions as Sibyl described to him on the evening before. It would not explain many states of her mind which had at different times perplexed him; but it was enough for the present to ascertain if it would really throw a light upon anything. He reflected that Sibyl was highly artistic in temperament, and that her impressions would probably be principally pictorial.

* 'My Schools and Schoolmasters,' p. 332.

He concluded that the strange way in which these visions appeared to be connected with some introspective view of her character, was due to what he considered her morbidly constant desire for self-growth and self-purification. Only, strangely enough, in that abnormal state she appeared to be so vividly conscious of that very fault which she could not ordinarily appreciate in herself, but which he was too often conscious of—a coldness; a coldness that seemed a part of virtue, yet made that very virtue almost less beautiful and less lovable. But this especial consciousness he attributed to the conversation which had passed between them; although he had not often found so few words clear her vision so easily.

As the pony slowly ascended the slight incline that led to the Laham Court gates, Professor Venn, the reins held lax in his

hands, and his eye fixed upon vacancy, reflected on all this. He wondered whether he had given sufficient attention to these mental states of Sibyl's which indeed had seemed only to cause him anxiety; wondered whether, if he devoted some time to obtaining a knowledge of their laws, he might not get a new and real aid in his studies from this intellect which was so differently constituted from his own. The great point was, how to guide the inner vision which Sibyl seemed to possess, so as to become adapted to his own uses? he had frequently endeavoured to obtain a mesmeric influence over her, and had failed. She was not what is called a mesmeric subject.

The pony, of his own wisdom, walked in at the gates and trotted up the avenue. He would have quietly trotted round to the stables had not Sibyl caught the reins

and stopped him at the door-steps. "In one of your brown studies, learned Professor," she said laughingly, as she jumped out and ran on into the house. Her housewifely heart told her they were already late for dinner.

She put on an airy muslin dress, and with some flowers in her hair and a peach-like bloom in her cheeks, came gaily down to their Darby-and-Joan banquet. "And this is the being I am going to make scientific experiments upon," said the Professor to himself, as he eyed her across the table. "I fear she is a more difficult subject to guide or to control than fire or air or electricity. One moment she is all true woman, as now; another, she flashes inspiration and looks hardly human; again she is dim, cold, and unresponsive. She is a problem."

Sibyl's keen sensitiveness told her vaguely, at last, that her husband was contemplating her in some chill and absent manner. His mind was full of thought, as she well knew by the depth of the perpendicular line in his brow; she could tell by the way his eyes wandered towards her that he was in some way thinking of her; yet she missed the affectionateness which was familiar to her. There was something which chilled her; and gradually her spirits drooped, and the influence of the day's sunshine vanished before the mistiness of night. She grew tired, and thinking that the long day in the air had made her weary she went early to bed, while her husband retired into his sanctum, spending there the best part of the night.

He had noticed how easily she had

apprehended the state of his mind, and, recognising his abstracted mood, had withdrawn herself from him. Here, he fancied, lay his path. He knew it was useless to attempt to obtain an arbitrary influence over her spirit; but through her keen sympathy and ready desire to gratify him, he thought he might gain his end.

The next day was showery; and they did not venture beyond the garden. A great part of the afternoon Sibyl sat by the open French windows of the drawing-room, with a book in her hands, but her eyes most often fixed upon the falling rain and the gladdening vegetation. Professor Venn stayed near her, and this made Sibyl quietly content; for, woman-like, she hated that his study key should be turned upon her. She did not wish to share the risk of having her eyes blinded by any of his

experiments, but she would have liked a peep-hole where she could see safely how they were going on.

They were very quiet; both filled with their own thoughts. Sibyl's mind was lost in dreams, of placid looking forward into a future of such peaceful days as this. But he was thinking of something very different; his thoughts were ambitious, hardly peaceful.

The afternoon slipped away and the evening came. After dinner, as the twilight began to gather round them, Professor Venn said,

"I am going to my room — will you come with me, Sibyl?"

"Oh! yes," answered she, a little wondering that he should ask her. "Shall I bring my book?"

"Yes, if you like."

He gave her an arm-chair by his study window, and then went and busied himself with some matters of his own. But he did not light his lamp; and as the twilight deepened he saw Sibyl put down her book and rest her head upon her hand. He glanced furtively at her face, the lines of which he knew so well, yet which were still such a mystery to him. He saw them grow deeper and less child-like; the familiarity appeared to pass out of them and give place to an expression which always to a certain extent awed him.

The silence and the shades of evening were acting as his allies, as he expected they would. The dimness of the material surroundings made the soul turn more easily to its own visions — or imaginings.

He went and sat down close to her, but said nothing.

Presently she turned her head to him, her eyes wearing that far-away unseeing look which told him that she had lost sight of him in the ordinary outside world.

"What do you want, Ernest?"

"How do you suppose I am wanting anything?"

"I can see you, I can see the attitude of your inner self. Your mind is bent upon something in which I am concerned."

"Yes; I want you, if you feel yourself in possession of that power of inner vision, to turn your attention upon a subject I will give you, and then to tell me what you see."

"What is it?" she asked, more faintly, after a moment's pause.

"Look back," he said, still feeling very doubtful what to ask, "back across the world's history, to the garden of Eden; tell me whatever comes into your mind about it."

He said no more; he did not attempt to influence her vision further; but as he spoke he thought of the scientific man's garden of creation, and then he thought of Sibyl and of her intense delight in a certain marvellous picture by a great living painter, of Adam and Eve leaving the garden, which she had seen not long before. Which would have the greatest influence upon her? or would her mind give forth some hidden, long-forgotten daguerreotype?

He waited some time without any answer; and he began to think she had grown altogether unconscious, for he

could not see her face, now that the darkness had deepened. He leaned forward and touched her hand; it was intensely cold.

"I see nothing," she said immediately afterwards, in her slender remote voice, "but there are voices speaking close beside me. I will tell you what I hear."

Then she went on to speak rapidly, fluently; repeating, as it seemed, a conversation. Without pause or hesitation, she spoke; and without any waste of words, for through it all ran a thread of thought, which gradually grew clear and luminous to Ernest's mind, as by philosophic method it was unfolded to him.

The man of science stood aghast at the rush of suggestive ideas that were placed before him; he listened in amazement,

feeling himself in the presence of an intellectual power which needed his full capacity of appreciation.

Not till Sibyl's voice ceased did it occur to him how utterly different from his expectations was that which he had heard.

The room was dark and silent, and he seemed to be left alone with his perplexity.

Whence had this philosophic treatise come? Nothing could be more unlike Sibyl's mode of thought, or of forming or uttering thought. For himself he so little looked for anything philosophic from her, that he had not turned his mind or will in that direction. He was puzzled; and in the darkness, as he sat and thought, the moments passed unconsciously; and it was not for some time that it suddenly occurred to him that Sibyl was so still, he

could hardly believe she was in the room.

He leant forward to touch her. She was not in her chair. He started up, wondering how to search for her in the dark; but when he advanced a step his foot struck against something. Stooping, he found it was Sibyl's prostrate form.

After a little trouble he managed to get a light; and then, kneeling down to look at her, found her pale and cold; her face looking ghastly, for the lower jaw had fallen and become rigid. Much alarmed, he lifted her in his arms and carried her to her bedroom and laid her upon a couch. For a moment he hesitated whether to fetch Dr. Hetley at once; while he thought of it, he was doing his best for her, and presently a gleam of consciousness

came into her face. So he decided to postpone the doctor again.

He passed hours of anxiety beside her; but when he thought she was fit to be left, he went to his study to make his notes of the evening's proceedings. He knew she was safe in being alone; for, practically speaking, she had recovered. But a deadly faintness lingered about her, and her mind was vacant, exhausted. Indeed, it seemed at these times, as if all her natural brain-power had been used up and she was left almost mindless, nerveless too.

She lay upon the couch in the room which she had first chosen for herself when she came to the house, the room in which Stella died.

She did not know this; she had no associations with the room; she only chose it because she liked it. Indeed the

Hamertons' loss meant nothing to her, as she had never seen Stella, and never met the others until after Stella's death. Professor Venn had scarcely spoken to her of them, for he was a man who took very little interest in his relations.

To-night as she lay alone, completely exhausted, yet wide awake, there came upon her a trembling consciousness that she *had* some associations with this room, that she had seen it before. A dim terror-stricken sense of some vague loss of identity came upon her at the same time, and completed her bewilderment. She closed her eyes and tried to steady her brain, but instead, consciousness deserted her altogether.

Meantime Professor Venn remained in his study, absorbed. His curiosity had been aroused. He began to regard Sibyl

with the eyes of a scientific man. If the lover had not been a little lost in this, he would have thought of returning to her sooner.

CHAPTER XII.

SIBYL MAKES TWO ACQUAINTANCES.

"She had no breath to sob or sigh,
But close about her bosom's pain
A stony weft did cling and strain."
'*Purpose and Passion.*' *Keningale Cook.*

"Seems she to me toil-worn and weary-souled;
And broken sleep she catches bit by bit,
Starting with unused words that seem to come
From days gone by; then chafes and wearies her;
I fear me much lest she be overwrought."
Ibid.

SIBYL was very unwell the next day; suffering principally from a mental confusion and an unaccountable distress of mind. For two days she kept to her room,

and then, being better, Ernest proposed that she should allow him to make another psychological experiment. His curiosity was taking possession of his scientific mind, and he could hardly help regarding Sibyl's weak and nervous state a little coldly, as a hindrance in the path of experiment. She felt this and endeavoured to conquer her physical self, so as to serve his ends; for Sibyl could not exist unless to please. Life became burdensome to her if she could not suit and satisfy by her actions those whom she lived with.

The moment she fancied that her physical indisposition stood in the way of her husband's intellectual gratification, she took herself bitterly to task and laid herself out to delude him into the idea that one of those terrible *ecstases* was her continual ambition. He was delighted, and it be-

came a constant pleasure to him, to prepare scientific as well as philosophic questions with which to test her when in this abnormal state. He was amazed at many answers he received from her; but this severe use of her brain was a great drain upon her strength, and she began to be constantly weak and ill.

He had frequent occasion to go to London during this time, but he had so much occupation at home, and he was so far anxious about Sibyl, that he was never absent except during the day. Even these absences were a trial to her, for she had learnt to depend so entirely on his society. She had met no congenial spirit among their neighbours. Indeed it was very rarely that she made a friend; for, though Sibyl was no heroine, her mind was singularly pure and clear, and she regarded

the average human being, especially of her own sex, with some surprise. The petty, narrow vices of conventional people amazed her; and she shrank from them.

Her mind was very listless at this period. In the evening came her time of action, and she gave herself up to Ernest. He exhausted her, mentally; and the morning brought weariness with it, and the day despondency. She was generally tired, and her old gleaming gayness came more rarely. When Ernest was at home and took her for long drives, she was content, and the day passed pleasantly enough; but when he was away she sometimes was alarmed at a certain vacancy of mind which was new to her and deprived her of cheerfulness.

She hated shopping; but she generally invented some, when she had a long day by herself, in order to go into Sandville and

mix with its life and see the people's faces.

One day she went to a shop about getting a dress made. She was shown into a little room, and met a face she knew. She could not understand it, till she looked out of the window, and noticed Dr. Hetley's house opposite. This was the face of the little seamstress whom she had seen through the window.

The dressmaker smiled. Sibyl wondered why. She did not know that she and her husband were regarded with kindly interest by such as had romantic minds. Professor Venn, though grave, was not too old to be still somewhat interesting; if he had been too old for that, he would probably not have been turning his mind to psychological phenomena. Elderly scientific men are rather fond of disbeliev-

ing in anything they cannot physically handle.

As to Sibyl, she was womanly enough in many ways; but she still retained almost the appearance of a fair child. A girlish creature, with dreamy eyes, who looked much more like some one just stepping into a romance than a lady "married and done for," such she seemed to the little seamstress; and so the seamstress smiled upon her. Some slight talk passed between them while the mysterious fittings and tryings went on; principally about the weather and the look-out from the window; for Sibyl had not much to say about her dress. She was one of those rare women who start on such an enterprise with an idea; and who don't talk it over and take a fresh one a hundred times.

She was interested with the somewhat

piquant face of her new dressmaker. Though pale and *petite*, she had twice Sibyl's physical vitality. There was something suggestive about her.

One of the other girls came in and spoke a moment to her, and called her "Jo."

"Just the name for her!" said Sibyl to herself.

She lingered a moment when the fitting was over and looked out of the window.

"I am nearly tired of that street, ma'am," said Jo, with a smile.

"I dare say," said Sibyl, rather absently.

She observed a figure opposite which interested her.

"There is Dr. Hetley," remarked Jo, as she busied herself among her scissors and things, after a quick glance across the road. "I'm sure he must get tired

of looking at the same people going by every day. For you see, ma'am, down this street we don't have many of the visitors; it's pretty quiet."

"I suppose so," said Sibyl, turning from the window. And then, wishing Jo good morning, she went through the shop and out to her little pony-carriage, which, with the yard-dog in attendance, stood waiting for her.

As she got in, Dr. Hetley was crossing the road. He exchanged bows; and Sibyl flushed crimson as she met his eye. "I am getting absurdly nervous," she said to herself, flicking at the pony rather angrily. Dr. Hetley, however, was fixed in her memory; she thought he looked a fine fellow, with an intelligent face. She would tell Ernest to make friends with him.

She did not need to do that. She brought them together soon enough herself.

When the flush died from her cheeks, came a sensation of deathly chilliness and sickness. In a few moments more she had fainted, and fell back upon the cushions of the carriage; while the reins fell slack.

Now the pony was lazy, being fat; he jogged on slowly for a while, but when he found that no suggestion of quickening his speed was made to him, he tried the experiment of going still more slowly, and then of stopping altogether. Finding that even this met with success, he took to the hedge-grass and was soon placidly engaged in browsing, while the dog stood at attention for some time, expectant of a fresh start, and then finding none came,

sat down on his haunches with a discontented air.

Dr. Hetley, when Sibyl met him, was starting out to pay a few calls within easy walking distance. One of these errands led him down the road towards Laham Court; so after some little time had elapsed he came out of the High Street, with his quick walk, which was almost a trot, and soon came in sight of the standstill pony-carriage.

He reached the cottage where he meant to call; but the aspect of the group by the wayside attracted his attention and he paused to look at it. He was very short sighted; and could not make it out at all. His doctor's nose guided him; he was convinced that there must be something the matter with Sibyl; so he decided to go on and see. As he neared, he

made out her attitude and divined it all.

"Poor little woman," he said to himself, as he stooped down and raised her from her crouching position. She was pale and cold, and her lower jaw had fallen; but she was breathing, though very slowly. Satisfied of that, he hastily propped her up in the carriage and jumping in himself whipped up the little pony, who, much to his disgust, was compelled to start on, with his mouth full of grass.

"Now," said Dr. Hetley to himself, ruefully, "this is just my fate. I am absolutely certain to meet some idiotic swell, or inveterate scandal-monger, people who never to their dying day will be able to understand this little incident. Good heavens! what it is to live in a country

parish and to have to truckle to all its inhabitants."

Presently the movement in the fresh air began to have some effect upon Sibyl. She breathed more easily, stirred a little, and then quite suddenly opened her eyes and looked full at Dr. Hetley who was watching her. Her head still lay back upon the cushions, and she did not lift it. She regarded him with a vacant, unrecognising gaze; and then a bewildered almost agonised expression came into her eyes, as if she were endeavouring to arouse herself and understand something. She attempted to move her head, but it fell back, and her eyes closed and her jaw fell again.

"Good gracious me!" he heard ejaculated at this moment, almost at his elbow. He did not need to look round—he knew

Mrs. Pauncefort's voice too well for that. "Just what I might have expected," he said to himself, and with an angry tug at the reins, that made the pony canter on towards Laham Court which was now in sight, he applied himself to propping Sibyl up again. As they turned in at the gates, he glanced back just to get the benefit of Mrs. Pauncefort's attitude of astonishment. She stood, with uplifted skirts, in the middle of the road, gazing after them. One look was enough for him. He knew the close questioning he would have to face when he got home. He saw no reason why he should fear it; and yet he did, because he knew the difficulty of making an unreasonable woman understand anything. He looked down at Sibyl's fair pale face; and hoped, as he looked, that this frail thing would

never become a target for the merciless tongue that resided in the head of his respectable aunt. The thought quickly passed; he had no reason to dwell on it, for Sibyl Venn was no more to him yet, than any other pretty little woman.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN WHICH SOME MISTAKES ARE MADE.

Professor Venn was at home, and was surprised that his wife was still out, for she knew the hour of his return, and he missed her invariable smile as he came in. Except when he missed her, he did not perhaps realise how necessary she had become to him; and he chilled her a little by this. For, as I have said, Sibyl lived like a babe, on milk and praise. Daily life is a tremendous test for any man's love; surely we should rather be surprised

at the moderate happiness that many marriages meet with, than shocked at the few poor blind souls who are driven into sin or suicide by intolerable "incompatibility of temper."

Ernest Venn was a man of order and of even humour; Sibyl's variableness was a daily trouble to him; Sibyl's want of capacity in most practical matters, very often vexed him; her want of accuracy in mundane affairs, tried the man of scientific education and chemical correctness. Life was not all sweetness to them, for frequently they failed to understand each other. Indeed it was but seldom that either apprehended the other with any clearness. Sibyl would vex him, and be unable to help it, and be vexed with herself, while all the time thinking him a little to blame. But these things, though

often recurring, always blew away, and a moment would come which would bring a revelation of themselves, and keep a glory of romance in their lives. By some word he would reach the inner Sibyl, and she flashing forth would make him feel the rare purity of her atmosphere; and the deep confidence of her eyes would penetrate to his soul, and make it patent to him that, in spite of blindness and tempers and minor discordances, the bond of their union was rooted deeply in their inner life. This conscious conviction was his salvation in the trouble, greater than any he had ever dreamed of, which already lay at his door.

And although her changing moods would distress him, and drive him from her presence into his sanctum, yet when she was not where he was accustomed to find

her, he realised, as we have seen, how necessary she was to him. He was realising this now; for he had come home full of various matters to tell her, and to discuss with her; and he felt lonely and disturbed. He stood in the window in an unsettled way, not quite certain whether to go to his sanctum and shut himself up, or to go out and meet her. While he debated this question, he saw the pony-carriage come in at the gates; and, as it progressed up the avenue, he scrutinised with some perplexity the figures in it.

He was clear of sight; and he soon saw that there was something strange about Sibyl, and that it was Dr. Hetley with her. He dashed out on to the steps, reaching them just as the pony-carriage drew up.

"What is the matter, Dr. Hetley?" he exclaimed, much alarmed.

"Mrs. Venn is not very well," said Dr. Hetley, stepping out and going round to the other side of the carriage, where Sibyl, still white and motionless, sat. "She must have fainted on the way home from Sandville, and I found her in this state, and the pony-carriage at a standstill. So I took the liberty of bringing her home."

"I am very much obliged to you, Dr. Hetley," said Ernest, and then without further talk, they carried her into the house between them, and put her in an arm-chair in the drawing-room.

"Get me some cold water," said Dr. Hetley.

He dashed it in her face, and the rude shock almost immediately brought

a little colour into it, and her eyelids quivered.

"Now give her some brandy," said the doctor, his fingers on her pulse. Ernest quickly got it and gave it to her with some difficulty. A few seconds after she had swallowed it, she opened her eyes, and again met Dr. Hetley's. She gazed at him a moment, and the colour gradually rose and flushed all her face. She drew her hand from him and seemed to look at him with alarm.

"What is it, Sibyl?" said Ernest; "you are not quite awake yet?"

She did not notice him, but still looked at Dr. Hetley with a bewildered gaze, and then suddenly put up her hands as though to ward him off and exclaimed, "Oh! go away—go away!"

"Why, Sibyl," exclaimed Ernest,

"this is Dr. Hetley, who has brought you home. You don't know what you are saying."

"Oh! go away," she cried again, and covered her eyes with her hands.

Ernest tried to move them, remonstrating with her.

"You had better leave her quiet," said Dr. Hetley; "she is unstrung and excited. Let her be quiet all day."

"I wish you would come and see her to-morrow, Dr. Hetley; I have several times thought of sending for you lately, she has been so unwell."

"Shall you be at home?" asked the doctor.

"Yes, to-morrow I shall be. I shall be here to defend you, in case she is as rude to you as she has been to-day. Sibyl, won't you say good-bye?"

A sort of confused moan was the only answer he got.

"Oh! she will be better by-and-by," said the doctor. "I'm so glad you've settled here, for a man of thought is quite a *rara avis* in this neighbourhood."

"Well, I hope we shall improve the acquaintance we have begun so oddly," said Ernest laughingly.

"Good-bye," said the doctor, and went off in a whirlwind, like an express train, as he always did.

He found James Pauncefort engaged in solemn conference with his mother when he got home, so he was not catechised as he anticipated. James had come down on important business, and all Mrs. Pauncefort's attention was absorbed in his affairs.

"Mother," James was saying as Dr. Hetley opened the door, "I should be able

to pay you the interest out of my income. You would lose nothing."

"Excuse me, James," said Mrs. Pauncefort in her hardest voice; "but I don't believe you would pay me a penny after the first year. You don't know yet what Mr. Hamerton will allow Jessie; you are extravagant, and she will have no idea of managing. Besides, you are certain to cry off, and say he allows her less than you expected. And Jessie won't come into her property while I live; I don't expect to outlive her father. No, I should be throwing my money away; just wait quietly till your salary is raised, and meantime save for your house and furnishing."

Dr. Hetley, with corrugated brow, stood in surprise at the open door. James got up and shook hands with him, in an absent way. Dr. Hetley knew from his manner

that he was wholly absorbed in considering how to obtain some object. He moved to go out again.

"Stay, Leonard," cried Mrs. Pauncefort, turning to him, but keeping her cold grey eyes fixed upon her son. "Stay, Leonard, and tell me what *you* think of this monstrous proposition. *I* call it perfectly monstrous — perfectly monstrous — and I think James must be a fool to come here with such an idea."

Dr. Hetley said nothing, but, looking from one to the other, awaited further explanation. James kept his eyes on the carpet and looked a little abashed: his mother had the best of him just now, for her blood was getting hot more quickly than his.

"He wants to get married directly," she went on, trembling with indignation, "and

he wants *me* to give him the money to do it. He wants to have a house and be comfortable, and to get the money out of me. Why, I've only enough to live on as it is; likely I'm going to give my money away to young fools who can work for what they want; just to pamper up that girl, indeed, I'm to beggar myself!"

"I never asked you to give it me!" flashed James. "You never gave me a penny yet that you could help, and you never will: so I shouldn't be foolish enough to ask it," he added with the indifference to people's feelings which makes the true taunter. Mrs. Pauncefort turned to him with a look that would have annihilated most people, but it had little effect on him.

"I only want my mother to lend me a

little of her capital," said he turning to Leonard, "of course I should pay the interest, and it would be just the same as if I borrow it from any one else."

"You *may* borrow it from some one else, James. *I* know why you want to get it from me; you think I shall let you off your interest. Borrow it from someone whom you will be compelled to pay it back to, James."

At this piece of shrewdness James coloured a little, and Dr. Hetley chuckled mentally; for he saw that James had really intended to obtain a gift of the money in the end. His honourable proposal of borrowing crumbled away before his mother's knowledge of his character.

Dr. Hetley did not quite see what he could say in the pause that ensued, so he sat down with the air of a man who meant quietly

to sit aside and watch the fight. It was a battle of selfishness. Selfishness, a strong will, and a prejudiced mind, in both cases ; what could a quiet man do or say between such opponents? They cannot be stayed by wise words or kind words: the selfish and obstinate nature must fight itself out.

At least so said Dr. Hetley to himself as he sat down by the window, intending to observe the course of events, and keep silence as long as possible. Just as he placed himself there, half behind the window hangings, he glanced out, and caught sight of a pleasant, cheerful, almost pretty face.

This was how it had come into his life before; when his home was made all discordant by jangling tongues, his eyes would by chance fall upon that little face,

and it would be a piece of brightness to which they were fain to return. It was the face of the little seamstress, just visible as she bent over her sewing machine.

Meantime, Mrs. Pauncefort had begun to "call names;" she had a fine vocabulary when she was in a real rage, and her language grew worse and worse as the enormity of James's conduct developed itself in her mind. She used a few nice epithets with regard to Jessie, for "egging him on to it," as she expressed herself.

"Jessie knows nothing about it," burst in James at this, but he had no chance to say more. He was snapped up for "answering his mother in that insolent way," so quickly, that, as he had not had quite as much practice as she had at this sort of thing, he was a little bewildered.

He began to walk about the room in an excited way, stopping every now and then as if to speak.

"Are you in a hurry to get married?" asked Dr. Hetley of him, in a low voice, as he chanced to pause near him. This was an excellent device to stop the torrent of eloquence, which he had discovered by experience. Mrs. Pauncefort would not listen if you spoke to her, but if you spoke to any one else, curiosity asserted itself and half unconsciously she would stop, in order to listen.

"Of course I am," said James angrily. "What is the use of hanging on in this infernal way in miserable lodgings without any home or home comforts, when it only wants an advance of a little of the money which will eventually come to me, for me to settle in a house of my own, to which

I could take Jessie. It's unreasonable that I should have to go on living as I am, when the thing could so easily be done."

Dr. Hetley was so tickled by this ardent lover, who so evidently desired "a house—and Jessie" that he turned and looked out of window to gain a moment before replying. As he did so, the little dressmaker raised her head and looked across; to his astonishment, she smiled, though faintly. Evidently, he thought, the smile was for him, for although he was half hidden by the curtains, she looked straight into the window; and, indeed, the street was deserted, and there was no one else for whom the smile could be intended.

He was startled; for he had grown accustomed to watch this little face in safety, and did not even think that she

had ever seen him; but ere he had recovered from his surprise, she raised her hand and made a sign, seeming to point down the street. Instantly she vanished from the window. A sound behind him made him start and suddenly look round to see if James had observed anything; but no, he was at the other side of the room, standing in a sombre way upon the hearthrug, while Mrs. Pauncefort, in her large armchair, was trying with trembling fingers to adjust her glasses and open her workbasket.

The smile—the sign—they had not been noticed, and they were for him. It was hard to refuse so bright a thing as that smile when everything else appeared so gloomy.

Mother and son had relapsed into a dismal silence, which no third party would

dare to break; so Dr. Hetley turned to the window again. He was so full of the pretty smile, that it seemed pleasanter across the road than elsewhere, although no one was visible now.

The twilight was gathering apace, and presently in the window opposite the blind was drawn down, and the gas lit in the room. He was just going to turn away when a door at the side of the shop opened, and a demure little figure stepped out, and, shutting the door behind her, without a single glance round or on either side of her, set off quickly down the street.

The sign, which had a little perplexed him, was now easily understood, by a man who had nothing at all interesting to do at the moment, and was excessively bored by his surroundings.

He rose and left the room. Neither James nor his mother took any notice of him, except that the former cast a covert glance after him as he opened the door.

He took his hat and quietly let himself out.

James crossed to the window and watched him leave the house, and turn down the street in the direction which the little demure figure had taken. He watched him till he was invisible in the gathering darkness, and then turned impatiently on his heel.

"Curse it all," he said, half aloud; and then, after a moment's hesitation, crossed the room to the door.

"James!" said his mother. He paused. She rose, shaking again with anger.

"James, you shall not leave me till you

have apologised for your insolent language and abominable conduct!"

Mrs. Pauncefort always forgot her own bad language.

We will leave them together.

CHAPTER XIV.

JO'S ROMANCE.

"Look in! you'll find I'm hollow.
Pray do not be afraid!"

Owen Meredith.

It certainly had grown very dark, and Dr. Hetley scanned the road anxiously as he went on. He did not want to miss that demure little figure now he had actually made up his mind to follow it.

It was dark, the road soon entered the

country, and trees made the gloom deeper. A swift, fresh wind disturbed their branches, and made the evening air delightful.

The road was quite deserted; he met no one.

By-and-by it had to cross a brawling brooklet made picturesque by over-arching trees. In the dim light the ravine through which it ran gained added beauty from mysteriousness. It was a favourite spot of Dr. Hetley's, which made it appear quite natural and pre-arranged that he should see a small person standing and leaning upon the bridge, looking absorbedly into the tempestuous little streamlet below.

"Who is this?" he said, half in a whisper, as he came and stood behind her.

She did not look up, but with her eyes still bent upon the water that was gradually

growing less visible in the darkness, she answered,

"My name is Josephine Sterling, I think you know that."

Her voice sounded hard, and Dr. Hetley was surprised at her tone. He said gently,

"No—I did not know it."

She started and turned, and as her eyes met his, he saw even in the dim light that her face was very white.

"Dr. Hetley!" she said, after a second's pause, rather in a surprised voice.

"You expected me?" he said interrogatively, "you meant me to come here?"

Jo stood still, with one hand resting on the parapet of the bridge. She looked up at him in the completest consternation; but he could scarcely see her face. As she did

not answer, he came nearer, and touched the hand that lay on the parapet.

"I wish it was not so dark," he said gently, "for I should like to see you smile again."

Dr. Hetley always made love like a gentleman; he thought it due to himself, whoever the object of his attentions might be.

"Don't speak to me like that," said Jo, fiercely.

Dr. Hetley drew back a little, and might have been seen to raise his eyebrows had it been a little lighter.

"I beg your pardon," he said; "will you please tell me how I may speak? I did not think it was wrong to say I should like to see you smile again, for indeed your smile was very pleasant to me."

"Oh!" cried Jo, shrinking away, "I

didn't mean—I—I am a fool! Oh! I do not know what to say!"

She covered her face with her hands, and leaned against the parapet, in a paroxysm of agitation or distress.

Just then the sky cleared a little and the moon shone out; its rays fell full upon the little dark figure, almost cowering in its attitude.

Dr. Hetley was struck with compassion.

"I do not want to distress you," he said. "What shall I do?"

Jo raised herself up and showed a little white face in which a sort of dogged determination was gradually ousting her agitation.

"If you are a gentleman and a kind man, as I believe you are, you will leave me, for I cannot speak to you now."

With his peculiar deprecating smile

which seemed to insinuate that he was sorry to find Miss Sterling as unreasonable and changeable as the rest of her sex, but would still do all he could to please her, Dr. Hetley bowed, and merely saying "Good night," started at a quick pace down the road, leaving her alone on the bridge.

She was not long alone. Dr. Hetley well and safely out of sight, somebody came out of the shadow and joined her,

"So you *have* come," she said, not angrily, but scornfully.

"I have, though 'twas a business for the devil himself for me to get away from the old lady. And I don't see why you gave me the trouble. What is it, Jo?"

"I wanted to see you; is not that enough. I have only just parted with your cousin who seems to have seen the sign I

meant for you, and taken it to himself. You have got me into trouble again, just as you always did, and I shall have to bear the brunt; for I'm too much of a fool to tell of you."

"I was afraid he saw; it was your fault to be so reckless. He was sitting in the window, when you saw me. I guessed he would see, and so I got out of the way quietly and let him take it to himself. And you deserved it, too, for risking it. Why did you do it?"

"Because I never see you, James, and I wished to speak to you."

"Well, what is it, now we are here?"

The clouds had blown off for a space, and it was brilliant moonlight now; Jo drew back and looked gravely at his face.

Jo was a practical little woman; but she had a way sometimes of dropping into a train of thought and pursuing it spite of all obstacles. Just now the strangeness of the relations between herself and James struck her especially, and she paused to think about them and realise them.

A few months ago they had stood on that bridge as pledged and innocent lovers; nothing had passed between themselves to alter that state, yet now instead of tones and looks of melting tenderness they spoke like conscious enemies.

Jo looked at him, as if she were graving his features on her memory. Already they were ineffaceably drawn there, but to-night she seemed to search for something new which she expected to find in them.

"You are one of the men that make bad women, hard women, heartless women. Your icy selfishness kills the hearts from our bosoms. I know you, James Pauncefort; you have done me no harm beyond showing evil possibilities of which I had not dreamed; you have done me no harm, because I was too proud and too poor. I am glad I am only a dressmaker, and that you were ashamed to marry me; and how thankful that my pride taught me to be nothing to you unless your wife. In whatever way I had given you my love I should have given it only to lose it, for you cannot love. You are pleased with another woman now as you were pleased with me, and you *knew* that you were safe in deserting me; you counted on my love which would prevent my proclaiming to the world that you had made me promise to wait for you till circum-

stances should make marriage possible. You have no heart, James Pauncefort; and you have nearly killed mine: and God knows I pity the fair girl that you have won for your wife with your handsome face, and false words and impatient passion which you call love! I despise you—I despise you, James Pauncefort!"

She spoke passionately; but there was something in her passion which cowed him; it was not of his own sort, like his mother's. He answered nothing when she ceased speaking, and only moved restlessly and watched her.

She had spoken passionately, but after a moment she resumed quite calmly,

"Of course you are aware that I have such letters of yours as would enable me to establish a breach of promise case. It would be rather agreable to force you into paying

to me some of your dear old mother's money!"

"But you will not," he said, in the most unaffected anxiety, terrified by her ominously cold manner.

"Ah!—you know I should despise it! and you have calculated on that. You are positively despicable, James Pauncefort, now I see you in your true colours. Why could you not come to me like a man, and ask for your release, instead of insulting me by trusting to my obscurity as a mere little sewing woman—instead of calculating on my weak love for you to hide you? I would have been your friend, then, for life. But—God!—I might as well speak to a stone," she cried out bitterly, looking into his face. And she cast her head down upon the parapet of the bridge and was silent.

"And is this all you wanted me for?" asked James angrily, after a moment's silence. "Do you want to say any more unpleasant things? because I must go."

Jo looked up—paused—and said in a voice that came from her torn heart—a voice of infinite sorrow and infinite tenderness,

"James, I did not mean to say anything disagreeable—I only meant to say—*Good-bye.*"

She caught his hand, kissed it, and flung it suddenly from her.

"Go," she said, in quick and instant dismissal, with a face and manner of ice.

The callous man, half-alarmed by the intense atmosphere of love that had been momently breathed upon him, was only

too thankful to be so dismissed. He murmured some words of farewell, and was gone, leaving her once more alone in the moonlight.

She flung up her arms with an action of despair and horror.

"And I love him still!" she cried aloud, "I, knowing him — suffering by him as I do!—*love* him still! God help me!"

Tears came to her at last, to help her to bear her pain, and she crouched by the roadside and wept. And it was late in the night when she let herself into the house where she lodged, and crept up into her room.

She had left her youth, and her romance, out in the moonlight night. And James Pauncefort had robbed her of both; but he could not appreciate the robbery, being

unable to appreciate the things robbed; for intensely selfish people are never really young and cannot comprehend romance.

CHAPTER XV.

SIBYL BEGINS TO BE PERPLEXED.

"That absolute love which many women feel,
But men how few! Not winds which icily
Breathe freshness underneath a twilight sky,
When swift Apollo's burning chariot-wheel
Flies westward, bear to mortals such delight
As that most perfect love, unselfish, infinite."

'A Poet's Philosophy.' Mortimer Collins.

A GLORIOUS, golden, slumbrous summer afternoon, and Sibyl in it. Right in the heart of it Sibyl seemed to be.

It was just the day after her attack of faintness in the pony-carriage; and Ernest being really alarmed, of course, to-day Sibyl must idle and be spoiled and play

the interesting invalid. And so when the inexorable butcher made his appearance in the morning, instead of the cook's terrible "What shall I order for dinner, mum?" Ernest himself tenderly put it in the form of "Is there anything you could fancy, Sibyl?"

"Alas, that we should be carnivorous animals," sighed Sibyl, "I'm sure *my* teeth are not carnivorous, Ernest. Let me off without any of that detestable flesh to-day, and order anything you like yourself—only mind you think of some limb which an animal does possess and don't make the cook laugh at you."

Which resulted in the cook's ordering the dinner—and ordering it with a keen eye to kitchen tastes and advantages.

Poor Sibyl, alas! had never had the opportunity of attending the school of

cookery, or of studying under Mr. Buckmaster; and housekeeping duties, in consequence of her natural disposition (though well done, as a rule, for, as we have seen, she had a conscience in such things), were a torment to her. Surely it was her misfortune, not her fault?

After the butcher episode she was not allowed to think of anything else; she must stay in her room, and get well. But by-and-by she grew tired of that, and announced that she must somehow or other be taken out into the air.

Which was done. Professor Venn issued from the door of the house, bearing a large basket-work arm-chair; and after wandering about the garden a little while in search of a pleasant place, fixed upon one some distance from the house, where was a little

cutting in a hill-side, forming a shady nook. The soil of Sandville and its neighbourhood was peculiarly charming, glowing with ruddy hues and rich shades of colour. The mark of the spade made the undisturbed grass and moss more lovely, by rare contrasts; and just here, the ground was shaded, so that the marvellous deep green of the damp moss lay close to the redness of the rich up-turned soil. It was half wild, too; and brambles and ivy clambered up the hill-side in the unsurpassed elegance of natural growth. This was the spot for Sibyl; and Ernest pitched her camp for her beneath an old hawthorn-tree.

Here she came, leaning on him, and sat, languidly content, right in the midst of the exuberant beauty of the day. Who can realise or reckon up the words that the

wide universe speaks to us in such hours as this—when the heart is stilled and quieted by eternal beauty ?

On such a golden day Sibyl's life seemed almost to flower. Yet the bud held itself just close ; her nature had not yet arrived at that state of ripeness which shows itself by a perfect faith and a great content in all things howsoever they be.

As she lay back in her big chair her form was full of quiet, for the sweet air soothed her physical nerves ; but her eyes, as they wandered from her book to the sky above, and thence to the figure of Professor Venn (who had established himself near her), wore a look of part speculation, part apprehension, which was habitual to her when she fell into reverie.

She was not certain of herself or her life; much as she loved Professor Venn she was not yet sure whether she suited him; happy as they were together, a shade of doubt sometimes crossed her intuitive mind as to whether they might not be happier. She felt herself so far from him sometimes that she trembled at the chill of it; and again she fancied herself so wholly unable to satisfy his ideal of her that she grew disheartened. For, often in the long talks that they fell into, they would discover themselves to be so widely antagonistic in opinion and mode of thought as to be discouraged by the almost want of harmony.

Most conversations between them ended in some discussion of good and ill; when Ernest would continually re-discover that Sibyl viewed such things coldly and from

too intellectual a point of view; probably, as he one day remarked, from a lack of passion which prevented her from experiencing anything but an elementary or simple state of good. Sibyl would do her best to digest these conversations, and attain within herself some idea as to whether her standard of good and purity was a false one.

An unwholesome and useless study; but one which a mind not wholly developed is prone to. Most often she was led into a train of almost morbid thought, by the half-suggestion which sometimes emanated from her husband, that, though pure as crystal and perfectly true, yet she was limited or cold in her capacity for love. She was made to feel that she lacked some generosity of growth, which though perhaps not so pure in its characteristics,

might yet be better or more to be desired.

"I think I know what he means," Sibyl would say to herself; "I have now and then seen such women—radiant creatures full of glow."

But she did not see her way to becoming anything different from what she was; and so her life, apparently cloudless, passed on, and almost her only prayer, day by day, was to love and be loved more fully. More fully! when already these two were wondered at by half the married people of their acquaintance for their constant affection. Which only shows how little we can know of anybody else's life, or form any guess at their desires.

They were revelling in mere quiescent existence to-day; it was too fine for Sibyl to distress herself much about anything.

And when Ernest finally settled himself beside her (full length upon the grass), and kept interrupting her thoughts by pieces read aloud from the book he held, she gave herself up to the enjoyment of the moment.

Perhaps a pleasanter, brighter, or happier picture could not have been seen on this fair earth, than that formed by Ernest Venn and his wife amid the radiant loveliness of the day; and so thought Dr. Hetley as, with his hands under his coat-tails, in a rather old bachelor-like manner that was growing upon him, he strolled in at the Laham Court gates.

For a wonder he was not in a hurry. Rarely enough did he ever walk at anything but express speed; and so when a saunter was possible he enjoyed it all the

more, and sauntered with a will. He had walked up to Laham Court after a visit at a house near by, having sent his carriage back to his dispensary on an errand; he knew he had a clear half-hour before it would fetch him, which gave him time to pay a leisurely call at Laham Court. So he lounged in at the gates, gazing through his spectacles intently at the ground; his brow knitted a little. His last night's adventure was in his mind; he had scarcely had time to think of it before now, and it worried him a little. He was perplexed by Jo, and what she had done; and he did not quite see the next move in the game.

The sound of a voice at some little distance broke in upon his thoughts, and looking up he saw, through an opening in the shrubberies, Professor Venn on his

back upon the grass reading aloud; while Sibyl sat, her hands in her lap, and her eyes on the horizon, and listened.

The doctor paused, took his hat off, and pushed back the hair from his forehead in a manner peculiar to him; all the while gazing at the picture framed in the green leaves. Presently a smile came over his face, and then setting on his hat, he struck on to the grass and crossed towards the group.

The thought that accompanied the smile was something like this: "These people, they are different from the people I am condemned to live with. They are worth knowing; I think worth winning as friends, and, indeed, their evident happiness in each other is enough to make them charming and interesting."

And so, with that sort of condescending

admiration which a bachelor feels towards a happy couple, Dr. Hetley looked critically upon the Venns as he approached them.

"There is Dr. Hetley, Ernest," said Sibyl in a low voice, and with a slight flush in her cheeks. Ernest looked up and, seeing the doctor close by, sprang to his feet.

"I must apologise for intruding upon you here," said Dr. Hetley, "but it seemed unnecessary that you should be summoned to the house, as I only wished to ask Mrs. Venn how she was to-day."

Sibyl turned towards him, and raised her eyes to his. The flush had died from her face and left her pale. She smiled faintly as she spoke to him.

"I must thank you very much, Dr. Hetley," she said, "for taking so much

care of me yesterday. And I must apologise if I was rude to you, as Ernest says I was; but, indeed I am hardly to be thought responsible when I am suffering from those attacks. Will you not sit down, Dr. Hetley?"

"But this is your chair, Professor Venn," objected the doctor, as Ernest offered him a wicker seat.

"True" said Ernest, "you see I didn't provide for an unconventional visitor who would pay us a call in our camp. But I prefer the grass, so pray sit down;" and he threw himself upon the grass again, while Dr. Hetley took off his hat and heaved a sigh of contentment as he sat down with a leisurely air in the wicker seat.

"Now, Mrs. Venn," he said, "though a consultation *al fresco* is a new experience

to me, I must ascertain how you are; you look wonderfully well considering your adventure of yesterday."

"Oh! I very soon recover and look well again," said Sibyl. She answered his questions quietly, and watched him with a rather amused glance as he made notes in a little book from his pocket, with an abstracted business-like air, as if she were a machine, the construction of which he was endeavouring to understand. But when he laid his finger upon her pulse, the flush rose to her cheeks again and a slight shiver passed through her; even the downcast eyelashes quivered.

He threw a quick glance at her, and remarked, "You are very nervous; I did not mean to physic you, but I think I must."

Then, with a little sigh, as much as to

say, "There, that is over," he put his note-book in his pocket, and turned to Professor Venn, who, leaning on his elbow, had been quietly observing his proceedings.

"I have been engaged in some researches lately, which I should like to talk to you about, Professor Venn; can you spare an hour or two some evening to come over and see me?"

"Certainly; but come here first. I shall be at home all this week; come to dinner the first evening you are free; to-morrow if you can. I could show you a few things in my study that you would like to see."

"That is an invitation hard to resist," said Dr. Hetley. "*May* I come, Mrs. Venn?" he added, turning to her with a twinkling in his eyes not quite concealed by his spectacles.

"*Do*," said Sibyl, with an answering smile; and so it was settled. The two men talked a little, in a rather desultory fashion, for the day was too fine to be anything but languid, when not compelled to be. Duty, however, and the passage of time, occurred to Dr. Hetley at length; his carriage had been waiting for some minutes when he looked at his watch and rose to go.

"It requires some moral courage to leave this delicious spot," he said, looking round as he stood, hat in hand, an instant. "What a charming house it is! What a pity it seemed that Mr. Hamerton should go from it so soon after settling in!"

"You see," said Ernest, "it was painful for them to remain here; I think they are wise to stay in London."

As he spoke, Dr. Hetley had just turned to say good-bye to Mrs. Venn, and held her hand in his. As Professor Venn's words fell on his ear, a confused and bewildered vision of Stella's intense eyes passed before his inner sight. Mrs. Venn was invisible to him, though his outward gaze was upon her face; he held her hand unconsciously; he saw only that vivid but bewildering vision, which blinded him to all else. Only an instant—Ernest saw no pause; Dr. Hetley recovered himself, and turned away with a smile and a bow. But he put his hand to his forehead, with a concerned feeling; what was the matter there? was all right? For his dearest possessions lay there. Thence must come his fortune—his future.

Sibyl, pale and quiet, watched them walk together to the carriage. Then her husband

walked back to her through the sunshine; and taking up his book sat down again to read.

"Ernest," she said, presently, "do you see anything in that man?"

"Who—Dr. Hetley? Well, he's a nice fellow, and clever."

"To me," she said quietly, but with the flush coming again in her cheeks, "to me there is something about him that is extraordinary. Ernest, I try to tell you all my feelings, because you do not like it if I have concealed any strong feeling from you. Well, I tell you there is something extraordinary about Dr. Hetley—to me, at least. But I do not know what it is. Oh! dear, I am very tired. Take me in, Ernest. I must go and lie down—and—I feel as if I wanted to cry!"

Sibyl stretched out her hands to him and laughed at herself as she spoke, and got forgiven; as pretty women do get forgiven for being silly and hysterical.

CHAPTER XVI.

A COOL LITTLE WOMAN.

JAMES PAUNCEFORT had gone back to town; his mother would not speak to him, and he was not made any more comfortable by his interview with Jo. So he returned to his office in a desperately discontented frame of mind.

Dr. Hetley found life at home a shade more endurable, for Mrs. Pauncefort had so exhausted herself upon her ill-behaved son, that she was compelled to keep to her room, and recruit; by which means

Dr. Hetley was left to solitary bachelordom.

It was the recollection of this fact which made him so readily accept Professor Venn's invitation, without pressing his own; for he knew it was hopeless for a day or two to ask Mrs. Pauncefort to be hospitable.

He had dinner by himself this evening, and then went out again to a poor patient in the town. He still found a certain pleasure in going among his poorer patients; humanity, grim and rough, is sometimes a relief after some experience of the littleness and emptiness which education and refinement often cover.

At the same time he found it harder than of old to be as humane as he might be to the poor wretches he had to go among; a certain crust was forming upon

him — a certain hardness which comes to all but the most intensely loving natures. How can it be helped?

In middle life, when a man is most deeply submerged in the affairs of this world, and is in the thick of the fight of his own career, it is not so easy for him to sympathise with others, and to enter into the trials of their lot. Even the gentlest souls seem to be a shade less gentle when in their physical prime, filled with the climax of their own life; it sometimes needs that all this shall be taken from them, in order that they may not grow into selfishness.

When Dr. Hetley went home from his visits in the town, he entered the house with instinctive quiet, fearful of disturbing Mrs. Pauncefort, and perchance bringing a torrent of talk upon himself; he

looked forward to some hours of uninterrupted reading. The heat and his long day's work had told a little upon his natural vigour, and he desired above all things to cast aside his prim professional appearance, to put on a beloved old coat, and smoke his one daily pipe within the arms of his study-chair.

It seems hard that a deserving person (as he certainly considered himself to be) should be denied such simple luxuries; but denied it seemed he must be, for a servant met him at the door to tell him that "a person was waiting in his study to see him."

Dr. Hetley was accustomed to lose his evenings in this way; he had no hour of the day or night that he could call his own; but at the same time he could not help feeling annoyed, and muttering some-

thing as he hung up his hat in the hall, which might have formed itself into a rather savage expression of feeling, if Mrs. Pauncefort's proper housemaid had not been standing close by, waiting to open the study door for him. Standing in some secret awe of that stately person, he swallowed his remark, and humbly advanced to the door of his sanctum, to enter it for work instead of play.

The room was lighted, and coming out of the evening twilight, he was dazzled for an instant. He closed the door and stepped forward, not yet seeing who his patient was, when out of a large chair, in which her small figure was almost hidden, rose—Jo.

The doctor looked at her for a moment in some perplexity, and with a smile trying hard to make its appearance in the

corners of his mouth. But he repressed it sternly when Jo said,

"Good evening, Dr. Hetley," with absolute gravity and decorum.

He returned her salutation with equal gravity, and requested her to sit down in his patients' chair, while he himself occupied the professional seat (which brought the patient into a good light), and resettling his spectacles on his nose, looked at Jo, and waited for her to commence proceedings.

Jo was not abashed. She looked at him a moment as if she expected him to help her; and finding he did not, she dropped her eyes and began,

"I hope you will excuse my coming to you in this way, Dr. Hetley," said she, in her quiet collected manner, "but I had no opportunity of speaking to you, and I

thought it far better to come to you openly, for no one can guess my business."

"Well, *I* can't, certainly," thought the doctor to himself; but he said nothing aloud, though Jo made a little pause; so she had to go on.

"I wanted to speak to you about last night," she said; "I wanted to explain—to—to tell you the truth. I dare say you will despise me, but I would rather that than that you should think of me as you probably do now."

She paused again, but the doctor's face was expressionless, and he did nothing to break the silence, except recross his legs.

"I must tell you, Dr. Hetley," she went on rapidly, "it all arose from a mistake. I did not see you at the window, but I did see James Pauncefort."

"James Pauncefort!" exclaimed the

doctor, uncrossing his legs again, and with his arms on the elbows of his chair, leaning forward as if in act to rise. "James Pauncefort! You saw him?"

"Yes, Dr. Hetley, and exchanged a sign with him that we have exchanged many and many a time before. And this last time I was rash, and you saw me. I was rash, Dr. Hetley, because I was desperate. I wanted to speak to him, and he would not give me the chance."

A flush was rising over Dr. Hetley's face as she spoke.

"What!" he said abruptly and almost roughly, "has that young scoundrel betrayed you?"

He was not thinking of her; he had the exemplary James before his mind's eye.

"Why—no," said Jo, with a little hard laugh; and then her voice changed

and she said softly, "only he used to care for me—or I thought so, and I—' here her manner again changed. She rose from her chair and moved from it a step, as she spoke, as if inaction was unendurable in the face of the thought in her mind —"and I — loved him — and—still do."

Here Jo broke down altogether, and leaning her head upon the mantelpiece, which she had stepped close to, in her excitement, she began to sob ignominiously.

And she had been rehearsing this interview all day, but she had not rehearsed the tears; indeed, she would have scorned the very idea of them. She had come out hard and cold all over, and had not calculated upon the power of her emotions. Now she was trembling with excitement, and utterly weak; melted by her own simple words.

Dr. Hetley let her cry a little while, and sat with knitted brow, looking at the ground. Then he went to her and touched her on the shoulder.

"You must not give way like this," he said, "or you will make yourself ill, and I don't want to have to doctor you. Now sit down here, and try to be quiet."

People always obeyed Dr. Hetley in such things as this; and Jo submissively allowed herself to be set down in a big chair, with a cushion behind her head, and a footstool at her feet. She ceased sobbing, and the doctor went over to his medicine chest and took a little time in mixing a powder with some water. When he came to her with the glass in his hand, she was quite quiet. But, as she took it from him, she looked up quickly and said,

"I did not mean to tell you that."

"What?"

"What I last said."

Dr. Hetley smiled.

"Ah! well. I think it is better that you and I should fully understand each other. Now drink that, and then you will be better able to talk."

Obediently Jo drank it; and Dr. Hetley took the glass from her.

"You are very kind," she said, looking up at him and smiling; her smile was Jo's beauty. No man who had been honoured with a smile from Jo ever thought the little seamstress plain or insignificant again. And Dr. Hetley got one of her very sweetest, for she thought he might be her friend, and if so, he would be the only friend our poor Jo had in the world.

"I am very sorry for all this," said the doctor gently, leaning over her, "and I

am sorry, too, that you should have been compelled to offer any explanation to me. Let me do anything I can for you, Miss Sterling. I shall be glad to serve you."

Jo measured the doctor with her woman's eye, as he said this; and saw that he was worth half-a-dozen James Paunceforts. He was a gentleman at heart; James was not, whatever he might be on the surface. All the same, her love had gone with James, and she had only respect left for the doctor or any other man. One of the strangest mysteries of daily living is the way in which true women will live and die for worthless men—and *vice versâ*.

"You can serve me, Dr. Hetley," said she gravely, "by keeping my secret. For that I shall be very grateful; and now good-bye."



